Does English know its place in the digital age?

First Thoughts on the New A-Level Specifications – what’s changed?
Interview with Ron Carter

HumBox – sharing made simple
Sharpening the Factual Edge: teaching journalism today
WordPlay is published twice a year by the English Subject Centre, part of the Subject Network of the Higher Education Academy. The English Subject Centre provides many different kinds of help to lecturers in English literature, Creative Writing and English language. Details of all of our activities are available on our website www.english.heacademy.ac.uk

Inside WordPlay you will find articles on a wide range of English-related topics as well as updates on English Subject Centre work, important developments in the discipline and across higher education. The next issue will appear in April 2010. We welcome contributions. If you would like to submit an article (of between 300 and 2,500 words), propose a book or software review (perhaps a textbook review by one of your students) or respond in a letter to an article published in WordPlay, please contact the editor, Nicole King (nicole.king@rhul.ac.uk).

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Welcome
Nicole King

My summer holiday was marked by the absence of screens. No mobile, no laptop, just lots of books and beach. But unlike other holidays, many of which have offered up more time to read, this year it was the absence of screens rather than the presence of books that made being away from ‘it all’ palpable. The state of being disconnected – literally – from day-to-day work, the 24-hour news cycle and, above all, e-mail, made for a very good holiday. It also revealed to me, with startling clarity, how profoundly my habits, our habits, of work are reliant on screen-based technology.

This fact is so obvious for most of us that it may seem odd to comment upon it. But within English, Creative Writing and English language we sometimes only grudgingly acknowledge how critical digital technology in particular has become to our teaching and to our research. Casual conversations about it are more apt to be the occasion for a mild moan about e-mail (see above) or proud revelation that one is a Facebook ‘resister’ rather than anything particularly positive about how one or one’s students have made technology do something useful or fun. Whether you are a technophobe or technophile, or somewhere in between, I think you will find this issue of WordPlay provocative.

In our cover story ‘The Subjects of English? Communities & Communication’, Louise Marshall and Will Slocombe discuss what is exciting and important about the fact that technology sits at the centre of English Studies. Our use of technology to facilitate quotidian tasks (post syllabi, reading lists) or to encourage student participation (online blogs, diaries and discussion groups) is just one part of the picture. Do we realise, Marshall and Slocombe ask, how fully technology has become the sinew and bone of the subject community? Through ‘shared experiences, practices and approaches… in relation to language/literature, historical period, literary theory or pedagogy,’ they write, technology at once enables our community to function and binds us together. Furthermore, it is the key to the vexing task of getting our students to grasp the value of English and succeeding in getting them to join our subject communities as they both learn and develop its practices.

Many of the other articles in this issue showcase new digital resources, examine new ways to use existing resources in our teaching or explore the habitats in which our subject community evolves and expresses itself. Candice Satchwell’s interview with Ron Carter is a prime example of the latter. Much of Carter’s work over a long career has been about joining up various English tribes, whether literature and language, higher and secondary education or, pedagogically speaking, the creative and the critical sides of the subject.

The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, at the University of Oxford, is a grand example of how technology can anchor a community while also enabling it to grow. Freely available, students and teachers can browse delicate and crumbling manuscripts, and their variants, while a plethora of contextual material, like photographs, video materials, letters and journals can also be browsed and searched. The archive also boasts supporting educational materials for higher education (and the compulsory sector) alongside a series of online tutorials. Read more on p. 26, in the article by two of its creators, Stuart Lee and Kate Lindsay.

Katharine Cockin writes about another digital archive and the fascinating lives of two theatre women, who happened to be mother and daughter: Ellen Terry and Edith Craig. Her article is full of ways to use their lives and work as part of interdisciplinary studies in literature, theatre, gender studies and material culture.

The Higher Education Academy, as part of a larger HEFCE initiative, is staking out some of its own territory in the world of Open Educational Resources (and if you’re not sure what that means, turn to p. 14). Charged with making sure English is included even in this pilot stage, Brett Lucas, the Subject Centre’s learning technologist, describes the goals and challenges of HumBox, a place where you can deposit, extract and customise innovative teaching materials.

Elsewhere in the issue you can read Barbara Bleiman’s article about the New A-Levels in English and English language now that one cohort has completed them; discover journalism’s shared territory with Creative Writing and how it’s being taught at Strathclyde and receive some practical ideas about incorporating YouTube into your regular box of teaching tools. Dave Ellis makes a case for improving assessment and helping students see their own work patterns using a tickbox form; while a Subject Centre mini-project has yielded the latest online resource (and journal) for Creative Writing. By turning to p. 46, you can read the top entries in this year’s student essay competition and learn exactly what students value about their degrees in English Studies and Creative Writing.

As your classes get underway, if you are inspired to try something new with teaching and technology or just need some advice, get in touch with Rosie Miles, our new E-learning Consultant (see p. 21). If you would like to contribute to WordPlay or have an idea for a topic we should cover, please let us know. In the mean time, enjoy the issue.
Meeting the Current Challenges: the humanities and employability, entrepreneurship and employer engagement
23 October 2009 – London
The question of student employability has rapidly risen up the agenda in the past few years at both departmental and institutional level. While students of humanities disciplines develop the intellectual skills and attributes widely sought by employers (e.g. critical thinking skills), teachers of humanities subjects in higher education can find it challenging to help their students articulate these skills to themselves and to future employers. This one-day conference aims to share good practice across humanities subjects and is for teachers of humanities in higher education seeking to enhance the employability of their students.

Networking Day for Admissions Tutors
20 November 2009 – University of London, Birkbeck
This workshop will give admissions tutors (or those in an equivalent role) an opportunity to share experiences, ideas and issues of common concern. There will be opportunities to compare procedures and standards and to discuss issues such as: traditional and innovative recruitment methods, selection tools, postgraduate admissions and recruiting ‘non-standard’ students. There will also be a briefing on secondary school qualifications.

Early Career Lecturers Workshop
27–28 November 2009 – Birmingham
Have you recently begun your first full-time post? Do you teach Literature or Creative Writing? Would you like to discuss and develop your teaching with your peers in English studies? If the answer is ‘yes’ to these questions, then this two-day residential event, aimed at new full-time teaching staff with less than two years’ experience, is for you. The event will also be useful to experienced staff embarking upon their first permanent post.

English and Diversity
4 December 2009 – London
The variability of human experience and the valuing of marginalised voices are at the heart of the disciplines of English and Creative Writing. To what extent, though, are our courses hospitable to the diversity of today’s student population? This event will give lecturers the opportunity to discuss the current position of ‘non-traditional’ students in English and Creative Writing and to assess the value of an inclusive approach to teaching. It will also include a session summarising a new Subject Centre report on the experience of disabled students.

Beyond the Classroom: English in the community
11 December 2009 – London
Increasingly, English and Creative Writing departments are looking beyond the seminar room and the lecture theatre, devising modules which give students the opportunity to develop their studies through activities in the wider world. This one-day event will be a forum for the discussion of the benefits and challenges of community engagement in our disciplines and will showcase innovative projects, including work with local writers at the University of Brighton and literature outreach projects based at ‘The Reader’ organisation at the University of Liverpool.
Brett Lucas casts his eye over recent developments in the world of e-learning.

Resources

Create inclusive teaching resources
A suite of new learning materials for lecturers, covering aspects of teaching inclusively, has recently been produced by JISC’s TechDis service. Teaching Inclusively Using Technology consists of a set of five modules each of which contains a 10–20 minute tutorial which can be used directly or adapted for your local context. The five modules are: Preparing Your Learning; Delivering Learning (Lecture/Classroom); Delivering Learning (Practical/Fieldwork/Placement); Delivering Learning (Online) and Assessing Learning.

www.techdis.ac.uk/getTeachingInclusively

Use Twitter in your teaching
Are you thinking about using collaborative web 2.0 type tools for research or teaching? A new set of user guides have been produced which explain how emergent web technologies like RSS, micro-blogging (e.g. Twitter), podcasting and social media can enhance your working practice. Each guide currently consists of a short animated video explaining the key concepts, supported by a more in-depth overview of the topic, including potential uses, risks and how to get started. Each guide will soon also have a supporting A5 version for download and printing.

http://web2practice.jiscinvolve.org/

Publications

Effective Practice in a Digital Age – A guide to technology-enhanced learning and teaching
‘It’s no use going back to yesterday because I was a different person then.’ Lewis Carroll’s prescient quote introduces this new JISC publication that updates the first edition of ‘Effective Practice with E-learning’. This is a guide for those who seek to better understand how to integrate technology with their teaching, with a focus on blended teaching. The guide is divided into pathways depending on your level of experience and institutional resourcing. Video clips are used to augment many of the case studies in the guide. You can download the guide, watch the clips and order a hardcopy from the URL below.

www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/documents/effectivepracticedigitalage.aspx

Higher Education in Web 2.0 World
This is the report of an independent Committee of Inquiry into the impact on higher education of students’ widespread use of Web 2.0 technologies, chaired by Sir David Melville. The report looks at the projected future trends in the use of technology in higher education.

www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/documents/heweb2.aspx
Tools

Create your own screen capture videos
Many academics are finding that the ability to capture what is happening on their screen as a short narrated video clip can be a great way to record visual help for students, for example, when navigating the course VLE for the first time, navigating a complex research archive or providing class or individual feedback (see our case study http://tinyurl.com/ot6uhe).
ScreenToaster is a free online tool that enables you to record videos of your mouse movements on any program or website that is on your desktop then save them to either the ScreenToaster website or YouTube (e.g. in a private channel). Once you’ve signed up and you have your headset ready it is very easy to use.
www.screentoaster.com

Tired of PowerPoint? Try something different ...
Prezi is an interesting new presentation system that lets you create zoomable presentations that resemble mind maps rather than bulleted lists. It is really easy to use and you can use the free version and save the file to the Prezi website or pay-for versions that allow you to restrict viewers and save bigger files. The uses of Prezi may stretch way beyond the traditional. Digital storytelling or departmental information packages for new students are just two possibilities. The software would also appeal to dyslexic students.
http://prezi.com

Organise and manage your research
Zotero is a free Firefox plug-in that enables you to extract bibliographic information from web pages, keep an offline version of a current version of a web page, store multiple JSTOR items and then attach annotations, tags, link items etc. This free piece of software is a worthy competitor to the commercial products you may be familiar with (e.g. Endnote and Reference Manager)
www.zotero.org/

Focus On …

Finding the most recent version of your files
Working with a desktop at home, a desktop at work and a laptop on the move can make locating the most recent version of a file you are working on a complex business. Carrying a USB stick or mailing things to yourself can help, but another way is to install Dropbox software on all your computers and assign one folder on each as the ‘shared one’. After that, every file you update or place into this folder will simultaneously update on all of your computers. Dropbox also has a public folder where you can place a file you want to share via a URL. This is a very useful tool for personal file management. The free version gives you up to 2Gb of storage.
www.getdropbox.com/

Other Bits …

What is a Tiny URL?
The URLs that you see on this page, and throughout this issue, were generated by a free utility which takes long URLs and resizes them for you. Access the utility yourself at http://tinyurl.co.uk

... and Bobs

• You may need to consult your humanities librarian about access to some of the resources mentioned in this area
• Where possible, I try to recommend software that is open-source, free of charge, copyright cleared, shareware or freeware
• All URLs on this page were last accessed in September 2009
• You can access all the links on this page directly in the online version of WordPlay
The Subjects of English? Communities & Communication

Louise Marshall and Will Slocombe ask whether the Subject of English ‘knows its place’ in the digital age.
In Literary Theory: An Introduction, Terry Eagleton tells the story of George Gordon, Merton Professor at Oxford, who, in 1922, ironically stated: ‘England is sick, and […] English literature must save it.’ Gordon went on to satirise the zealotry that characterised the discipline during the post-war period: ‘English literature has now a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State’ (Eagleton, 1996: 23; see also Baldick, 1983: 104–6). His sardonic words echoed over 80 years later, and, in our jaded times, we might not believe that literature can save our souls or heal the state either, but such statements may, nevertheless, retain some valency.

With much discussion of the ‘value’ of literary studies recently, be it from the government, the public or from within the academy, we find ourselves in the precarious position of having to justify the ‘value’ of our subject yet again. But what is the value of English? If it is merely to produce students well versed in literary ‘classics’, then what is the ‘value’ of such an education to a graduate of today? Likewise, if our primary goal is to foster that most amorphous of phrases, ‘critical thinking’, then what is the “value” of such a skill outside of the academic sphere? There is one, of course, but articulating this to each other is difficult enough, let alone to students or those outside the subject. Eagleton notes the resonance between Gordon’s words and Matthew Arnold’s ideological agenda in promoting mass education (something else that echoes today), and while we should be cautious in adopting either Gordon’s cynicism or Arnold’s politics, there is still a kernel of truth in the values that Gordon’s statement ascribes to the subject.

Where Arnold believes that literature can prevent anarchy, Gordon is more suspicious of the appropriation of literature as social panacea. Despite their very different agendas, there exists a common ground between the rhetoric of Arnold and Gordon; both commentators identify literature as a powerful form of communication, one that has lost (for Gordon) and retains (for Arnold) the potential to entertain, inform, salve and revitalise. Today, technology finds itself in much the same predicament. It is perceived as social glue on the one hand, but is held responsible for cultural fragmentation on the other. What an English degree achieves, arguably, is not only an understanding of literature but, more importantly, an understanding of the role that it plays in society. However, in order to achieve this in relation to contemporary society, some understanding of the intersections between English studies and technology is required. We may not be able to heal the state – and many of us would not want to – but we can nevertheless show the role we adopt as ‘the subject of communication’.

The subject of communication?

One of the first skills that our students are told is vital to their success as English undergraduates is effective communication. We rehearse again and again the value of an English degree as evidence of an ability ‘to communicate effectively’ in both academic writing and verbal communication. But what exactly is effective communication in a networked society? Neither of us would dispute the value of essay writing or oral discussions, but as the only ways of judging a student’s ability to communicate, such tasks occlude the fact that communication itself has come to have a much broader significance.

In the oft-maligned 2007 QAA Benchmark Statement for English, ‘effective communication’ is referred to in both subject-specific and generic skills, and includes the acquisition of ‘rhetorical skills of effective communication and argument, both oral and written’ and ‘advanced literacy and communication skills and the ability to apply these in appropriate contexts’. The overlap between these specialist and generic competencies reveals the difficulty in determining what ‘effective communication’ means within these different contexts. By enshrining communication as both subject-specific content and generic skill, as both subject and object of an English degree, we are clearly labelling ourselves, and being labelled, as the subject of communication.

Elsewhere in the Benchmark we are told that students should ‘develop a range of subject-specific and transferable skills, including high-order … communication skills’. Seemingly, the notion that English literature is a powerful mode of communication remains integral to authorised accounts of the subject. It certainly seems to us that public perceptions of our subject identify English graduates as good communicators. However, the Benchmark and our own experiences of teaching and learning hold that English has a much broader scope than merely ‘effective communication’. The Benchmark identifies a host of skills and knowledge, including critical reflection, textual production and reception, enthusiasm for the subject and an awareness of the ‘continuing social and cultural importance’ of English literature. Such statements echo Gordon’s rhetoric, showing how this debate continues, but there are other elements identified in the Benchmark – most notably electronic resources – that, while ‘new’, remain central to a subject predicated upon communication.

Interestingly, the ability to evaluate such electronic resources is only identified as a generic, not subject-specific skill, as is ICT itself. ‘IT skills’ (where is ‘Communication’ here?) are to be promoted through ‘the ability to access, work with and evaluate electronic resources (such as hypertext, conferencing, e-publishing, blogs and wikis).’ Surely, if English is
to retain its place as the subject of communication, ICT skills are precisely the type of skills English graduates are expected to possess in a networked society. Moreover, should they be learning about soon-to-be-obsolete forms of communication or instead be encouraged to see the broader picture of technology-enhanced communication? As a central component of English studies (and thus subject-specific rather than generic), students must learn about the applications of technologies rather than the technological applications themselves.

**The subject of community?**

It is through the concept of technology-enhanced learning environments (TELEs) that we believe such issues can be addressed. As practitioners of, and researchers in, our subject, we all know that English has a broader potential than merely the production of graduates who can read, write and speak with authority. We want students to know how to act as independent researchers rather than literary parrots squawking: ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged …’. Such independence is gained through active learning and it is opportunities for individualised, self-directed learning experiences that we need to provide.

TELEs are not limited to virtual classrooms or teaching materials disseminated via a VLE, but arise from students customising their own learning environments and bringing their own technologies (textual or visual, digital or paper) into the classroom. With the growth of mobile technologies, students themselves can negotiate the degree of blended learning they experience. The potential of the student-directed teaching environment can therefore be fully exploited in terms of enabling students to become independent researchers in their subject, irrespective of the teaching environments offered by the institution or designed by the teacher.

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TELEs do not just mean that individual students bring their own technologies to bear upon their learning, however, but that they also communicate their learning to their peers. It is in this way that English demonstrates its value to the broader community: students learn the benefits of community through research and vice versa. In so doing they translate and transpose existing tools for collaboration into the classroom context, bringing their ‘everyday’ experiences to their scholarship. Moreover, through the inclusion of these experiences in the academic setting, students come to understand the malleability of tools, strategies and approaches. The act of incorporating social technologies into learning and teaching means that ‘critical thinking’ becomes the filter through which students can appreciate and appropriate these technologies in both spheres, developing subject-specific and transferable skills through understanding the acts and contexts of communication.

The communities that we engage in as subject practitioners and researchers can also be regarded as TELEs. As such, TELEs go beyond the immediate confines of our day-to-day teaching, for as a subject community we readily engage in such environments in order to inform our own textual interpretations. What binds these communities together are our shared experiences, practices and approaches, be they in relation to language/literature, historical period, literary theory or pedagogy. But what enables them to function is an increasing reliance upon technology. Our goal, as a subject, is to address the age-old question of how to get students involved in English, to see its value and to join our subject communities, as external advocates if not as practitioners. Technology can help us to achieve this and enable our students to make the transition from passive learners and receivers to active participants and readers.

For us, the simplest way to conceptualise the centrality of community to the subject is through linking Stanley Fish’s famous concept of ‘interpretative communities’ to Randy Garrison and Terry Anderson’s ‘communities of inquiry’. Fish’s ‘interpretative communities’ proposes that textual interpretations are constructed through a community and that students need to be introduced to that community in order to understand such interpretations. In so doing, of course, students learn how to do the subject alongside learning what the subject is. Garrison and Anderson’s “communities of inquiry” is a pedagogic model uniting environment, teaching and community to foster student-led inquiry; for them, such communities are predicated upon technology, given the ways in which it can be used to facilitate different types of communicative practices and place the teacher within, rather than outside, the community.

By bridging between these two hypothetical communities, our aim here is to recognise that students learn the subject by doing the subject. The integration of technology into this is not an afterthought or an e-learning tickbox exercise, but a recognition that, used appropriately, technology can foster a sense of community. As a result, we can begin to build a community of practitioners – comprised of both us and our students – who understand not only the content and curricula of the subject (its ‘what’), but also its values and methods (its ‘why’ and ‘how’), as well as developing the necessarily technological proficiencies to benefit the wider community, whether in educational, cultural, economic or societal terms.

**The subject of the subject?**

As a result, what has come to the fore in the projects we are involved in is the need to work together as a community and the ways in which technology can augment this. During the English Subject Centre E-learning Advocates project, the idea was simple: to develop a network of practitioners who could advocate how technology can best be employed to assist departments’ teaching and their students’ learning. It was, quite simply, a ‘community’ project. In our current two projects, ‘HumBox’ and an inquiry-based learning project through CILASS (both of which are discussed elsewhere in this issue of *WordPlay*), the idea of community is again important (see p. 14 and p. 45 respectively). In a true scholastic community, we learn as much from our students as they do from us. In such a community, the learner/teacher paradigm shifts – knowledge is co-created by the community for the community.
The student experience of active learning is central to this. As such, the aim of this piece is not to advocate technology as the solution to all our problems. We take issue with many discussions of technology-enhanced learning, e-learning and blended learning (to name but three types in an ever-increasing array) because they foreground the technology rather than the student. There is an increasing sense, in both educational theory and more broadly in society, that technology is a panacea. Whether you believe this or not (and we do not), students still need to engage critically with new technologies and technological change in order to exploit the potential of their status as graduates of English. By learning through technology they are prepared for some of the challenges that they will face, while not detracting from either the knowledge we expect them to gain or the skills needed to make use of such knowledge. The technology is not the point here, the students are.

students learn the subject by doing the subject ... The integration of technology into this is not an afterthought or an e-learning tickbox exercise

Of course, balance needs to be maintained between what the students bring to the environment and what the environment brings to the students. Students, as much as any literary text or linguistic practice, are the subject of our subject, because without them we have no future. Classrooms and virtual environments are spaces of negotiation, of contact and community, and we cannot adopt a ‘one size fits all’ approach. If we wish to promote the ideas of communication and community, then we have to do this within learning environments, making them active, community-focussed and ensuring, above all else, that they actually work, adapting to the needs of individuals as much as to the changing faces of literature and language.

As participants in this subject community, we must foster both research and teaching, promoting the subject through our teaching in order for our students to see the value of research. They are, after all, the next generation of scholars. For all our concerns over research impact, it is important to remember that a thought-provoking textbook or engaging seminar has the potential to impact upon the future shape of the subject as much as any piece of 4* research. If we can show students what the subject ‘is’ and what we ‘do’, then we have shown the value of our subject to them. In so doing, we show how our subject, given its continued focus on communications and community, is of value to contemporary society and so have already justified our value. Like Gordon, we may no longer believe that literature has a ‘civilising function’, but perhaps English has a broader purpose today: to expose to the community the various ties that continue to bind us together.

Community, Technology and student inquiry: five practical suggestions

1. Promote ‘research-led learning’: Encourage students’ to follow their own interests, do research into their favourite books (the vast majority will do this online) and discuss them with their peers. Encourage them to create community resources and produce essays for undergraduate journals on topics that interest them.

2. Make technology relevant in the classroom: Instigate collaborative research activities that facilitate online research (remember to give them a little longer to carry out the task – the results will be worth it). Discuss their findings, focussing on the ‘how’ as well as the ‘what’. Deliver strategies for research through the subject content, not outside of it.

3. Make technology relevant outside the classroom: Ask questions via discussion boards or blogs that feed into seminars and group discussions. Base the choice of materials, the themes addressed and/or the activities undertaken on students’ ideas and choices. Make your own contributions, suggesting other sources or topics to extend the discussion and, more importantly, to value the ongoing discussion.

4. Use ‘paperchases’: Ask students to follow up their interests by playing a bibliographic paperchase. Get them to find an essay they find useful and then select one of its sources to read. From this source, they should find another bibliographic entry and read that. Repeat as often as they wish. Discuss what they have found alongside how they found the materials.

5. Break the rules sometimes: We are told that good learning activities need students to be aware of three things: what they should do, what they should produce and how long they have to produce it. Why not break the rules? Give them a goal but don’t tell them how to achieve it, or give them a method but don’t tell them where it should take. Enjoy the journey with them!

Finally, whatever else you do, make sure that everyone involved (including you) understands and can identify the benefit to their own learning.

References


The English Benchmark Statement www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/statements/English07.pdf
An Interview with Ron Carter

Candice Satchwell, the Subject Centre’s Liaison Officer for HE in FE, speaks with Professor Ron Carter about his long career teaching and researching English language, linguistics and literature.

Ron Carter is Professor of Modern English Language at the University of Nottingham. I visited him there on a sunny day in April, and we talked for a good hour and a half (despite him seeing me immediately after several appointments with PhD students).

Recently, Ron has been awarded an MBE. When I raised this, towards the end of our meeting, and asked him what it was in honour of, he shifted in his seat, smiled, and said, ‘What was it for? Well, I don’t know! These things come out of nowhere.’

Actually, it was for services to education, both higher education and in schools, and although recognised worldwide as a leading authority in English and linguistics, Ron is pretty happy that he has been recognised not as contributing to what might be construed as an esoteric academic body of work, but to education. As he said, ‘and that’s nice because it’s something I’ve always been interested in, without ever working in an education department’.

This exchange exemplifies the modest nature of Ron’s responses. Always reflective, considered and measured, Ron described his career almost as though it had happened by chance: ‘It’s difficult to look back and to say why you did things in a certain way.’ There was no assumption or expectation from Ron’s family that he would go to university, ‘but I did, partly because you are inspired by teachers at school who put you in a certain direction and then it just happens. You find you enjoy it, it gives you a lot of fulfilment and you stay with it.’ Despite this nonchalant description, Ron is deeply committed to English as a subject, leading a research centre in the English Studies department at the University of Nottingham, where he has now taught for 30 years. In that time he has secured major research grants from AHRC, ESRC and Cambridge University Press, and has written and edited more than 30 books and published over 100 academic papers in the fields of literary linguistics, language and education, applied linguistics and the teaching of English and in the new field of e-social science.

Looking through Ron’s long list of publications, it is striking that he continues to revisit literature among his wide-ranging work in English language and linguistics. We talked about this blended approach to English, and he explained that he has ended up in a department where he feels very comfortable, because he is surrounded by people who are passionate about both language and literature. A theme of our conversation was Ron’s lasting interest in how language illuminates literature and vice versa, and how both contribute to education in a broader sense.

Ron’s first degree was in Russian, as a main subject, with English as a subsidiary, and his interest in language underpins all of his work. He remembers beginning work in a teacher training college and becoming very interested in education and how language can help to inform developments within English departments in schools.

‘What you saw in the secondary schools was that literature was an essential part of a child’s development, but quite often what they also needed was guidance in literacy development. And that was an area that was not focussed on in the schools that I taught in as much as literary development. So, there was an awful lot of attention to narratives, to stories, to poetry, to creative writing, reading fiction, and so on, and while that is essential and very important to the development of the individual and the development of all sorts of skills and understandings, I didn’t feel it helped as much as it might have done with the nitty-gritty of constructing writing in other genres, writing non-fiction and developing an understanding of language structure and how that informs the building of texts and so on.

Creativity is very important, but it has to be creativity seen as a common property, not something which is the exclusive preserve of a genius.

‘And working in a teacher training college, as I did for five or six years, I got very interested in how applying language understanding to literacy development actually paid off for the teachers and for the kids that I was working with. It was from that moment that I got more interested in linguistics and its potential, and in applied linguistics in particular. And things just developed from there.’
An additional factor that reinforced Ron’s interest in English language was working in schools in Birmingham as a young graduate, where there were many students for whom English was not a first language. ‘At that point, and subsequently working abroad in Singapore for 18 months, I got interested in ESOL, ESL, EFL, that sort of area. But this just confirmed developing interests in applied linguistics. So it’s a case of always seeing how you can use linguistics in ways to help people to learn languages better, or learn to use English better, be it their first, second or third or fourth language.’

As a true linguist, Ron is careful to define his terms. When I suggested that his work always appears to have an application to the real world, with a view to helping learning in some way – whether it be finding better ways of communicating the teaching of English as a second language or helping children with literacy – Ron voiced his doubts about the word ‘applied’ when collocated with ‘linguistics’. He did not want to distance himself from the theoretical base which all applied linguistics requires: hence, although he agreed that he was in the business of solving language problems out there in real communities of use, which required a commitment to engaging with those issues and those communities, he was still an academic in a university.

All the same, Ron now oversees a literacy scheme where 30–40 students from Nottingham University go out to volunteer in junior and secondary schools in an educationally disadvantaged area to help young people with literacy. ‘The students often do one-to-one reading, working very closely with the teachers in local junior schools, and the university sponsors an academy school so students also volunteer to work with Years 9 and 10 in secondary schools, talking about books – it’s literature, but more talking about it. Sometimes they do manipulation of texts, and for some of those with real behavioural problems, just talking to them for 40 minutes, on their own, one to one, which for most of those kids is a rare experience. The students get a lot out of it: they start off by thinking, understandably, that it’s a good CV item, but by the time they’ve done it for a year, and they do take it very seriously, they feel very fulfilled. The kids undoubtedly benefit. If they are from communities where reading is not something you do at home, then talking about books is certainly not something you do, helping with the basics of language construction is something that you don’t do and even just talking is something you don’t do. So it’s a drop in the ocean, but it’s a project here that the department is committed to, and there are increasing numbers of students each year that do it.’

Another of Ron’s passions is creativity. ‘Creativity is very important, but it has to be creativity seen as a common property, not something which is the exclusive preserve of a genius. I’m more interested in the way creativity manifests itself in everyday contexts, for all of us, whatever our intellectual or social or cultural backgrounds. I’m particularly interested in spoken language – everyday interactive speech, involving humour and word play – which has been neglected in moves to embrace creative writing. And it’s something that we all do. Everyone has a creative capacity and it manifests itself in language. I feel passionate about that, and about grammar as well.’ Ron sees a case for putting grammar back into the curriculum – ‘but in relation to real language use, spoken discourse as well as written discourse. Grammar that illuminates how texts work and grammar for creativity.’

However, he recognises that curricula are very full – at undergraduate level, and particularly at PGCE level – so his aim is to help in whatever way he can: hence the literacy scheme. ‘It’s an old-fashioned view, but unless you can handle language well in school you are always a step or two behind everyone else. You see generations of really intelligent kids not make it through the school system, not make it through to university, because of difficulties that they experience with literacy development.’

In relation to teacher training, his view is: ‘The more teachers know about how language works, the more they can help children to learn.’ This was the impetus behind the Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project, which Ron directed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Famously, the implementation of the project was banned by the Conservative Government, which, as Ron acknowledges, probably gave it much more publicity than it might otherwise have received. With his usual magnanimity, Ron described it as ‘an instructive time’, not least in recognising the difficulties of ‘engaging with the discourse of language issues in ways that make sense in the public domain’. There are positive outcomes in that a ‘samizdat’ (clandestine/underground) publication from the project is still being used, ‘but more importantly, other projects have come about as a result.’

As we talked about the integration of English language and literature in university departments, in primary schools, and in secondary schools, the topic of the A Level in language recurred several times. Ron sees this as largely responsible for the changing profile of English undergraduates.
‘You and I would have come through an A-Level route where English was literature. That’s changed radically during the past 20 years, and now many, by no means all, students are very, very competent in language studies.’ He sees this as a benefit, particularly in relation to teaching in schools, but he is still grateful for his own literature background ‘because that sensitises me to how texts work’.

Ultimately, he believes (referring to the renowned linguist Michael Halliday) that the relationship between language and meaning is what is important. ‘Literature lecturers find that the language work students do is enhancing their work in literature; and some people who were literature specialists are now language specialists. The subject is better if it is mutually informing.’

So what kind of a teacher is Ron? Again there is a pause, while Ron reflects. ‘I quite like anything that involves students in activities – that sounds very bland, but I’m more comfortable with situations where students are doing things, especially doing things with texts.’ Ron refers to the work of Ben Knights and Rob Pope in relation to transformation of texts. ‘You take a text, and the students, or you and the students, manipulate it in various ways – rewrite it in a different style, turn it from serious into humorous, change the genre, make the text operate in a different way – anything where the learning is activity based, doing things with texts. I’ve always liked that sort of teaching.’ He sees his role as inductive rather than didactic: ‘The students can get a different style, turn it from serious into humorous, change the genre, make the text operate in a different way – anything where the learning is activity based, doing things with texts. I’ve always liked that sort of teaching.’ He sees his role as inductive rather than didactic: ‘The students can get a different style, turn it from serious into humorous, change the genre, make the text operate in a different way – anything where the learning is activity based, doing things with texts. I’ve always liked that sort of teaching.’

Ron recognises allows many students to take the course who may not otherwise be able to. Typically, his conclusion was that we should work forward with the technology at our disposal, imbued with the knowledge we have about human communication: ‘It is a case of refining our understanding, and learning how to do it better, but based on the values we have learned. We know that mutual support is positive – from fellow students, from tutors, from identifying with an environment. So how do we reproduce that in a virtual environment? That’s what we should work on.’

But it’s not the same as getting involved. The more actively involved you are the better student you are.’

We talked about the influence of new technologies, both in terms of the study of language, and the impact on teaching and learning. Some of Ron Carter’s most recent work has been in the field of corpus linguistics, using databases of spoken discourse, which he says ‘has transformed the subject for me’. He sees the fact that he and his students can access millions of words on a computer in order to analyse language use in various ways as a huge benefit. He is currently working on follow-ups to his Language and Creativity: The Art of Common Talk (Routledge, 2004) and on further theory and application of linguistics, especially corpus linguistics, to literacy development in schools, in health-care communication and in cross-cultural business communication. With regard to technology in relation to teaching and learning, Ron described himself as a ‘fence-sitter’, seeing both the advantages of multimodal forms of communication at a distance and the advantages of face-to-face interaction between tutor and student and between peers. The English department delivers a distance MA, which in many ways replicates attending in person with the use of podcasts of lectures, e-mails from tutors, bulletin boards for discussion and so on, and which Ron recognises allows many students to take the course who may not otherwise be able to. Typically, his conclusion was that we should work forward with the technology at our disposal, imbued with the knowledge we have about human communication: ‘It is a case of refining our understanding, and learning how to do it better, but based on the values we have learned. We know that mutual support is positive – from fellow students, from tutors, from identifying with an environment. So how do we reproduce that in a virtual environment? That’s what we should work on.’

Recurring phrases during the interview included: ‘and there’s nothing wrong with that’ (with reference to the prevalent view of ‘correctness’ and Standard English which his work has endeavoured to expand); ‘and there are agendas you have to respect’ (the Tory Government who banned his LINC project); ‘and that doesn’t mean it’s better or worse than anything else’ (with reference to applied over pure linguistics); while a question about what advice he might give to a new lecturer met with some resistance to the idea of his giving advice at all. Although Ron is passionate about many aspects of his work in English language, an affable humility pervades. His words always acknowledge alternative perspectives and communities of practice beyond the potentially ‘introverted’ environment of a university. He is interested in inclusivity, in improving children’s life chances, and always in understanding people better.

His interest in people cropped up again when we talked about what he might have been were he not an academic. Ron’s (no longer) secret alternative ambition is to have been a sports journalist. ‘Understanding the psychology of being at the peak of your powers in sport is something I find fascinating. And given that it is only a game, and there are parallels between sport and life, I think in another life I’d love to have written about football, golf or tennis, or some sport, for a newspaper. It probably sounds bizarre, but something to do with sports psychology – writing about it, studying it. Also learning a lot about yourself, about individuals and teams, and how they operate, how and why they succeed and fail (he is a Leeds Utd supporter!!). I would have liked to have done that.’

Lately, Ron has been re-reading the late 19th- and early 20th-century Russian fiction he read as an undergraduate, acknowledging a certain circularity to his reading career but finding new inspiration from familiar writers. Although he admits that the themes are not always those considered to induce pleasure – ‘indeed they may be thought more conducive to depression’ – he concedes, ‘but that’s all right. You don’t always read books to be made to laugh, and they are all very readable. I can see myself continuing to read them: there are lots of them, and they are usually very big books!’

Features

Literature lecturers find that the language work students do is enhancing their work in literature; and some people who were literature specialists are now language specialists. The subject is better if it is mutually informing.
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– Professor Elaine Showalter, Professor Emerita of English, Princeton University, USA, and Author of *Teaching Literature*
What teaching materials we use and where we source them from is about to experience a shift, and, Brett Lucas reports, it’s all about sharing what we already do.

The English Subject Centre is part of a consortium of four Humanities Subject Centres working with partners in 12 different institutions on a pilot project to build a collection of freely available teaching materials called HumBox www.humbox.ac.uk. Quite simply, ‘Open Educational Resources’, or OERs, are teaching materials released into the public domain making them free for public or educational use as long as the original author is acknowledged (Millard, 2009). This project forms a part of a much larger HEFCE programme which aims to make available a wealth of teaching materials from across the HE sector. This article tells the story of HumBox and its significance for English studies while also providing the broader context of where we are now with OERs and e-learning.

HumBox will be an easy way for humanities lecturers to share resources developed for teaching. You’ll be able to upload things like handouts, seminar activities, lecture slides and assignments and download and adapt resources others have deposited. It’s all about sharing ideas, approaches and resources and saving time.

‘This is the first time that a project of this nature will have been undertaken on this scale, collaboratively across an entire national educational sector.’

Malcolm Read – Head of JISC

Background

The most often used definition for the term OER is: ‘digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching and learning and research’ (OECD, 2007). The concept of ‘openness’ is based on the idea that knowledge should be disseminated and shared freely through the Internet for the benefit of society as a whole (Yuan. L et al, 2008).

Over the past 10 years, teaching materials have increasingly migrated to digital formats.1 From the simple websites of the late 1990s, today’s course websites have become dynamic interactive spaces within Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) where students share thoughts and answer questions on discussion boards or blogs, access and analyse critical readings before or after their lectures and seminars, update their personal learning journals, do exercises related to relevant research archives, watch videos from public and educational sites and even listen to audio podcasts of lectures or audio feedback on their essays. The learning environments we are creating for our students have changed radically. At the same time, more and more students are supplementing – or replacing – lectures, seminars and course materials with resources they uncover on the web (Katz, 2008).

Forward-thinking lecturers are fostering links with new learning communities beyond the walls of institutions and looking at ways in which teaching materials can be broken up into smaller discrete and more flexible ‘chunks of learning’, delivered at different times and in different configurations than traditional campus-based models. New modes of course delivery also enable literature, language and Creative Writing departments to redefine and therefore increase their potential student numbers more economically. Fully online undergraduate and postgraduate degrees delivered to worldwide audiences, summer courses, franchised modules sold to the business sector and community spaces within social networks for new students are just some which I have witnessed in the past year.

Online course development takes time

Despite the rapid rise in the number of so-called ‘hybrid’ or blended and fully online courses and the satisfaction students get from engaging with

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1 The growth in digital resources for teaching in English began in the 1990s with the growth in personal and course websites as well as the growth in digital resources like Voice of the Shuttle (http://vos.ucsb.edu/) and CTI textual studies (http://users.ox.ac.uk/~ctitext2/)

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these various modes of teaching, it still takes considerable time, commitment and dedication to develop good online course materials that contain a variety of tasks, activities, well-researched links, podcasts and videos. The necessary time commitment is the reason cited by many lecturers for not doing it at all. A 2005 survey of English e-learning practitioners captures the mood well: ‘sometimes there’s a prohibitive workload involved in preparing and uploading materials ... the labour can seem disproportionate to the learning context it is geared to support’ (E-learning Practitioner Survey in English Studies, 2005).

However, there are more factors than lack of time that are slowing the development of good-quality, flexible e-learning materials. There is still little reward in the academy for their development. It can be a struggle to find inspiration and ideas from within the discipline and sometimes it is simply not possible to produce the resources you really desire given copyright issues, technical restraints or institutional barriers.

The HumBox project plans to change that. In the pilot phase, we are collecting over 400 resources from the Humanities and, in the process of turning them into OERs, we are investigating solutions to the issues cited above with the aim of creating a community of practitioners committed to ‘open’ sharing and reuse.

Openness is not a new concept

Making learning resources openly available is not a new concept, developing from the public library movement of the 19th century to the Open Source Software developments in the 1990s.

In the mid-1990s, relatively simple learning objects were made available informally, as instructors shared syllabi, lesson plans and learning activities. Later, more complex and/or topic-specific repositories came into existence as museums, journals and magazines, educational television and other organisations placed content on the web and encouraged it to be used for educational purposes (Smith Nash, 2005).

Different kinds of collections are beginning to emerge, some with a centralised approach. Massachusetts Institute of Technology were pioneers in the educational field with their OpenCourseWare initiative (http://tinyurl.com/2tz2rf) which puts entire courses online (1,900 courses and counting), including reading lists, lecture notes, videos and syllabi. The UK’s Open University joined in with OpenLearn (http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/) (with 5,000 hours of tuition) and its sister website LabSpace (http://labspace.open.ac.uk/) that allows users to repurpose courses to suit their contexts then re-upload them for others to share. These models take considerable investment in time and money.

Other collections focus on one particular format and are community driven. iTunes U, for example, allows institutions to create a branded interface to audio and video podcasts of courses as well as interviews and presentations. Public sites like YouTube and Videojug (videos), Flickr (photos) and SlideShare (presentations) provide a myriad of teaching materials that can be linked to or embedded in course websites. The UK’s national collection of learning materials for FE and HE – Jorum – was launched in 2005 and has a small collection of Humanities resources (www.jorum.ac.uk). A new JorumOpen service will be relaunched in 2010, with all the outputs of the UKOER programme.

Are we ready to share?

In 2005, an English Subject Centre project (Masterman and Lee, 2005) investigated attitudes to sharing of learning materials among staff and postgraduates in three different English departments and found that:

- The majority of tutors reuse learning materials created by others between 5% and 50% of the time
- The learning materials that are most reused are primary texts, secondary research texts, images and reading lists
- Although Internet search engines and websites are widely used in sourcing materials for possible reuse, personal acquaintance plays an important role
- The overwhelming majority of respondents were prepared to make some or all of their learning materials available for use by others inside and/or outside their home institutions

The principal barriers to the sharing of learning materials include pragmatic issues (teaching material is contextualised to the class and tutor) and individual’s concerns that the materials are not fully representative of their teaching and scholarship abilities. HumBox will take the experience and research carried out on OERs both within the subject and the wider community to create a humanities community collection that builds on a sustainable practitioner-led model.

Introducing the HumBox project

The HumBox project aims to publish a bank of good-quality humanities resources online for free download and sharing, and, in so doing, create a community of humanities specialists who are willing to share their teaching materials and collaborate with others to peer review and enhance existing resources. (See screenshot of an example resource overleaf.)

HumBox will enhance the variety of resources available to students and thus promote international interest in the study of Humanities disciplines in UK higher education. A full list of objectives can be viewed on our project website www.humbox.ac.uk

Working closely with the humanities community, to understand their needs and requirements, is an essential part of the project and our institutional partners are helping us to achieve this. In English, we have partners working at Coventry University (Billy Brick), University of Winchester (Mick Jardine) and Aberystwyth University (Louise Holmwood Marshall and Will Slocombe) (http://tinyurl.com/mazf84). These partners are responsible for helping us to explore the issues, collect resources, evaluate the process and develop the embryonic community of ‘sharers’.

Why give away your teaching materials for free?

‘The aim is simple, by developing OERs Higher Education institutions are able to contribute to the public information space, share new ideas, raise the profile of teaching and give individual academics a more public voice.’ (Millard, 2009)

We hope that gaining access to a significant collection of peer-evaluated resources of this kind will have an immediate practical impact on teachers and learners in English studies. For example,
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Lecturers will be able to draw on the materials for curriculum and course planning tools, learning materials could be mixed and matched into study units or full courses and they could also be used as sources of inspiration when designing seminar or lecture support material.

The opportunity to showcase excellent teaching materials of publication quality will also enable the resources to be used as staff development opportunities for discussion and critique. Because the resources will contain information on the author and their host institution and be openly viewable, browsing HumBox resources will enable potential students to explore the kinds of learning experiences they might encounter during their time at the institution and could potentially raise the profile and reputation of the named author, not to mention the quality of teaching and learning across the discipline as a whole.

The development of the interface for the collection will be particularly important in facilitating a culture of sharing. We are learning about building simplicity and usability from successful Web 2.0 sites like YouTube that enable users to deposit all kinds of multimedia content simply and easily. We know that users like to see what others think of resources via the ‘comment’ areas as seen on sites like Amazon (www.amazon.co.uk). People also like to link to personal profile pages for authors of resources, as seen on sites like Facebook (www.facebook.com).
Problems and issues for OER
Currently, there is little or no encouragement for lecturers to develop learning materials with reusability in mind. One of the outcomes of the HumBox project will be greater insight into what is required and how much extra time will be needed to create ‘open’ content. Hopefully, in the future, this kind of endeavour will be seen as an integrated part of scholarly work that is useful, first and foremost, to a faculty member’s own teaching, scholarship and career.

There are additional issues surrounding copyright, intellectual property and, at the most basic level, about motivating people to make contributions to HumBox. Often lecturers don’t believe their own materials are ‘good enough’ to share with others. HumBox and the UKOER programme as a whole are working together to provide answers to these questions so that all parties understand clearly what is permissible and systems are in place to encourage community-based systems of quality assurance.

Look out for a HumBox event in your area
HumBox will be an easy way for humanities lecturers to share resources developed for teaching. It will be an opportunity to test whether a self-sustaining community of humanities educators is viable. There will be many challenges that will arise as the pilot progresses, but it will explore ways to work through these to create a sustainable model for HumBox that is attractive to the humanities community as a whole. After all, sharing knowledge is in-line with academic traditions and a good thing to do.

HumBox will be officially launched early in 2010. If you wish to know more about the HumBox project during its pilot phase, have a contribution or comment to make, please contact Brett Lucas, project manager, English (brett.lucas@rhul.ac.uk) or visit the HumBox website (www.humbox.ac.uk).

References

More Information
The UKOER programme is described on the JISC and HEA websites www.jisc.ac.uk/oer and www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/opencontent
JorumOpen and related services are explained on the JISC website www.jisc.ac.uk/news/stories/2008/04/jorumopen.aspx
Firefox browser www.mozilla-europe.org/en/firefox/
itunes u: www.apple.com/education/mobile-learning/
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www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/afterenglish
First Thoughts on the New A-Level Specifications – what’s changed?

Barbara Bleiman gives an early initial report on the impact of the new A-Level specifications on teaching and learning, drawing on the comments of teachers she has talked to during the first year of the new curriculum.

In 2006, Lucy Webster and I wrote a report for the English Subject Centre on the new A Levels that had been introduced in 2000, giving an overview of the kinds of experiences that students might have had before transforming themselves after gap years or beach holidays into English undergrads. Just eight years after the introduction of Curriculum 2000, there has been another major revision of the A-Level curriculum and, as the first year concluded a few months ago, with an AS cohort having just sat their exams, here’s an early update on what’s changed and how it’s being received. This is not a thorough survey of the new specifications, nor is it a detailed analysis of the impact. Rather, it is an early and fairly impressionistic account, drawing attention to some major shifts, some initial indications of the impact and some aspects that colleagues in higher education might either deplore or delight in when their first new cohort appear in a year’s time. It draws on comments from a range of highly experienced teachers who responded to an e-mailed request from me for first thoughts at the end of the first year. It focusses predominantly on Literature but with some brief comments on Language and Lang/Lit at the end.

First, here’s a brief overview of some of the major changes in the English literature specifications.

1. As with all the English subjects at A Level, there has been a reduction from six modules to four. As a result, there are likely to be fewer early exam entries in the AS year and a slight disincentive to do a lot of retaking, since modules often involve substantially more texts.

2. Internal assessment has become compulsory, with an increased maximum weighting of 40% across the whole A Level. (All of the Literature specifications have taken up this full weighting.) The background to this is that, in setting the criteria for the new A Levels in English, QCA said that it had to be either compulsory or removed altogether. A case needed to be made that key aspects of the subject could only be fulfilled through internal assessment. In the event, it was felt that it was important enough to retain – to allow independent research, training in research methodologies and academic essay – writing practices and more extended work across a broader range of texts – even if it meant that some teachers would have to tackle it, somewhat reluctantly, for the first time.

3. There is much more reading. There was a sense that in the old specifications set texts had taken on a disproportionately important role, being read in isolation and in enormous depth, but sometimes as the only example of the genre and the only text in an exam. Now, across AS and A2, there is a requirement to study at least two texts from each of the major genres of poetry, prose and drama, with a minimum of 12 texts being studied in all, rather than the minimum six of the 2,000 specifications. (For Lang/Lit the number of texts is six, as compared with the previous three.) There is also a wider range of texts being studied: the requirements for Shakespeare, a 1300–1800 text, study across all three genres and so on still hold true, but, in addition, there is a new requirement for a post-1990 text, which has brought all sorts of new texts into the frame, from Carol Ann Duffy’s Rapture and Owen Sheer’s Skirrid Hill to Vernon God Little, The Penelopiad or Life of Pi. Some texts in translation are now possible, with interesting combinations such as the study of King Lear and Oedipus Rex or A Doll’s House alongside Victorian fiction and poetry. In some specifications, critical or cultural material can also count as a text.

4. With so many more texts and one of the Assessment Objectives (AOs) focussing on comparing and linking texts, some specifications have become very strongly (perhaps even overly) comparative in their approach. The extent of this depends on how they have chosen to allocate texts within modules. Some specifications still retain a focus on single texts within exams, while saving comparative work for the more leisurely study.
possible within internal assessment. Others require comparison of unseen texts with independent reading in exam conditions or comparison of several texts in a single answer (e.g. an aspect of three narrative texts compared or three Gothic or Pastoral texts compared).

5. There are much greater opportunities for independent study and independent reading. Teachers are being exhorted by examiners not to teach the same books to all students for internal assessment but instead to encourage students to make their own selections of texts and many are embracing this new requirement enthusiastically.

6. There is general encouragement for a more conceptual approach to the teaching, with students being expected to develop a ‘toolkit’ for the study of literature. An example of this is in the study of narrative texts, where students are expected to develop a more sophisticated understanding of narrative technique (voice, point of view, structure, use of time and so on) by looking at more than one narrative. This stepping back and understanding the text in relation to others was often marginalised previously by the intense and detailed focus on a single text.

7. AOs in the 2000 specifications had developed in rather unexpected ways. The intention had been to make explicit the skills and understandings of literary study, but an unwelcome side effect was the atomised assessment that followed, where students were awarded 2.5% for this objective and 5% for that. Some examiners, teachers and students became AO obsessed, marking student work with AOs all the way down the margin of essays and losing touch with the holistic common sense view of what was good writing. Now the AOs have been rationalised, with only four per subject (for Lang/Lit there had been seven). Some Awarding Bodies are now marking the AOs equally across a whole module, rather than marking one essay for one and another essay for another. This seems to be having the effect of putting them in their proper place, as a way of revealing underlying skills and knowledge but examining them as they interrelate in situ, rather than trying to pick them apart.

8. There are welcome new opportunities for responding to texts in creative ways, following similar developments in many higher education literature courses. Internal assessment in most of the specifications allows for at least one piece of writing that is a text transformation, a recreative piece, an imitative piece or a piece of writing that draws on independent reading or style models for writing.

9. In many of the specifications there is greater clarity about what is meant by ‘alternative interpretations by other readers’, with more encouragement for students to engage constructively with critical material, whether it be critics writing about a set text or applying critical positions to a text. In one specification, the application of critical material to the study of a text is one compulsory element in internal assessment. In another, critical material constitutes one set text. Most of the specifications reward judicious use of critical material in essays.

These overarching points might imply uniform change but they express broad trends and in fact there remain substantial differences between specifications and a student’s experience of literary study might be quite different depending on which one their school has chosen. A student who has followed AQA B, for instance, is likely to have a strong sense of genre (with units on narrative, tragedy
Features

the Gothic or pastoral) and have been encouraged to have an explicit focus on critical approaches through their A2 internal assessment. A student following the AQA A course will have spent their whole AS year looking at a theme chosen from Victorian Literature, World War 1 Literature and the Struggle for Identity in Modern Literature, with a strong emphasis on independent wider reading. WJEC students will have undertaken a lot of comparative work in their exams and will have had the chance to do extensive independent reading in preparation for their own writing in a chosen literary genre. There are lots of subtle nuances and variations of this kind from specification to specification.

What teachers said

What have teachers and students made of these changes? As indicated, it depends very much on the specification and the teachers. Broadly speaking, however, the response from the teachers I have come across and consulted has been positive, with teachers reporting greater enthusiasm from students and a surprising willingness to read more, and read more independently. (Complaints that their students ‘just aren’t keen readers’ have been noticeably fewer!) This hasn’t been without its costs. Some teachers have felt that the time spent in reading more has detracted from the space for in-depth development of thinking, particularly with specifications that have chosen to put the extra texts largely into examined units, or produced ‘over-complicated’ questions – ‘So much material, so little time. Very short essays can feel like dumbing down,’ said one teacher. Where extra texts are read and studied for internal assessment, this seems to be regarded as a more positive experience. ‘Challenging but thorough’ is one comment, and the same teacher, from an inner city sixth form college said, ‘The course (with its emphasis on critical texts too) is excellent preparation for an English university course.’ One teacher at a grammar school in the east of England said, ‘there has been a considerable increase in intellectual challenge as a result of the emphasis on narrative and genre and the need to make connections between texts. What has been particularly enjoyable is the freedom from the burden of external assessment imposed by three units at AS – we have genuinely had time to explore, follow up interesting tangents and give both students and texts the space to breathe.’ Several teachers commented on the fact that having more internal assessment made it worth giving it its proper time and attention, although responses were influenced by the specification, with some feeling that a particular Awarding Body’s angle wasn’t entirely helpful.

Some of the teachers I approached felt that the new courses made more demands on students and therefore ‘enlarged the gulf between the weak and the strong’, but this feeling definitely wasn’t shared by all. For some, despite not yet having taught A2, the loss of a final synoptic exam paper felt troubling, perhaps because they felt that it had had the effect of pulling together all the strands of the course into an all-embracing final exam. The whole of A2 is supposed to be synoptic, so it may well be that by the time they have taught the whole two years these teachers will feel a bit differently about this issue. As is often the case, the variables of choice of spec, nature of cohort and other factors all contributed to teachers taking radically different views on the same issue! For example, the opportunity for creative and recreative approaches was hugely appreciated by some: ‘The students loved the recreative coursework (including the commentary) and enjoyed the ‘independent learning’ opportunities that led to some strong presentations of their chosen texts’, while another complained that the ‘recreative writing remains rather baffling’.

While recognising the greater challenge of the new A Level in Literature, one teacher in an inner-city sixth form college mourned the loss of the Advanced Extension Award (AEA), which provided space for freer, more challenging and wide-ranging study and where ‘students frequently exited the exam smiling and saying how much they had enjoyed it.’ She comments that the Extended Project is a possible alternative but fulfils slightly different functions and is not a replacement for AEA, though valuable in its own right.

Lang/Lit

A much smaller sample of teachers responded to my request for comments, so this is a much more limited view, somewhat coloured, as with the Literature, by people’s changes of Awarding Body and specification. Sometimes they comment that they preferred the previous spec, because of the Awarding Body’s styles of questioning or levels of support. They are not necessarily comparing like with like. By and large, however, it seems that rather less has changed in Lang/Lit courses. One teacher commented, ‘the first-year course is greatly improved and more naturally integrated’. As with Literature, there has been an increase in the number of texts (literary and non-literary) and an opportunity to develop reading habits in students. One teacher said, ‘Students have risen to this challenge and the idea of reading has become buzzy around the department.’ Nevertheless, the same teacher and one other raised slight concerns about the ‘skimpiness’ of the literary content compared with the new enlarged Literature course. She said that for students going on to do Literature courses in higher education they have to do a lot of independent reading between AS and A2 to prepare themselves to make a convincing application. Greater weighting for internal assessment means that ‘proper time is being given to preparing for this so that students are fully able to learn through doing it, which is good degree preparation.’

Language

With teachers changing specifications, sometimes they are comparing an old spec with a new one from the same Awarding Body, sometimes an old spec from one Awarding Body with a new one from a different one. This makes comparison complicated. Nevertheless, some broad ideas emerge.
The new four-module structure has generally been welcomed. One respondent commented that the changes are less obvious than in Literature but ‘more subtle and profound’. A teacher and examiner, she talked about the greater rigour in her spec of personal investigations being focussed on representation in texts rather than general analysis and writing. Her worries about internal assessment being offered in both years proved unfounded. This has ‘allowed the students to find their own linguistic interests sooner, which has been very beneficial in engaging and motivating them’. Another teacher echoed these fears about extra internal assessment and her surprise at how it had allowed even less able students to produce ‘quality original writing and commentaries’ in AS. Another teacher also commented on the benefits of the internal assessment – ‘a very welcome opportunity for creativity, which students and teachers continue to enjoy’. For his specification there were pluses and minuses across other units – more knowledge base in the fixed sociolinguistic topics set in one paper but a loss of data analysis experience in another. One teacher, quoted above, bemoaned the loss of an examined discursive essay demonstrating knowledge of language including both theories and research. She also worried that exemplar material from the board suggested a lower requirement for linguistic precision and understanding than she would have expected.

Final comments
When Curriculum 2000 was introduced and new teaching patterns were established, it quickly became clear that several unexpected and unwelcome aspects had emerged as a by-product of well-intentioned changes. In particular, the over emphasis on AOs brought too much ‘teaching to’ the objectives and a highly pragmatic, some might say cynical, approach from students who wanted to be told exactly how to score high marks. Colleagues in higher education complained about students’ lack of interest in learning for its own sake. Equally, it seemed as if independent study had been down graded, with few opportunities for students to pursue the kind of open research that would prepare them for academic study in higher education. And the complaints from teachers and academics about students who didn’t have any enthusiasm for reading came thick and fast. Whatever surprises emerge as the 2008 specifications bed down, these areas of concern do seem to have been addressed. I am optimistic that in two or three years’ time more students will be arriving at university with a greater willingness to take their own initiative. They will have a stronger sense of enquiry and more confidence. They will take greater pleasure in reading books. If the early signs prove true and teachers seize the opportunities offered, the A Levels of 2008 could be a significant moment of change.

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Rosie Miles
our new E-learning Consultant

Wanting some ideas about how to develop online activities using a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in English Studies? Interested in seeing ‘live’ VLE use in HE English courses? Got some questions about what is or isn’t working in terms of e-learning in your classes? Interested in what does or doesn’t work for other colleagues in English in terms of their use of e-learning tools?

In the 2009–2010 academic year Rosie Miles, Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Wolverhampton, will be acting as an E-Learning Consultant in conjunction with the English Subject Centre. In 2006–2007 Rosie was one of six E-Learning Advocates supported by the English Subject Centre, aiming to champion and promote the use of successful e-learning within English departments. In 2007–2008, Rosie continued a version of the role and between 2006–2008 developed a ‘roving’ brief for herself whereby she visited English departments and demonstrated her own ‘live’ VLE topics and how they were being used within English courses. She is also one of the authors (with Benjamin Colbert and Francis Wilson) of a forthcoming English Subject Centre Good Practice Guide exploring the design, moderation and assessment of online activities in English Studies (due for publication in 2009–2010).

In 2009–2010 the English Subject Centre intends to offer the following in conjunction with Rosie’s role:

• An online conferencing facility to which English colleagues can bring queries, comments and discussion around e-learning issues within the subject.
• The possibility of a visit to your department to demonstrate using online VLE activities within English courses.
• A blog whereby Rosie will be charting ‘a year in the life of e-learning in English’.

For more details, see the English Subject Centre’s e-learning pages www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/technology/index.php
or Rosie’s blogsite www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/mse-mentor
Sharpening The Factual Edge: teaching journalism today

Eamonn O’Neill describes the challenges of teaching and doing journalism while emphasising journalism’s shared territory with Creative Writing.

Eamonn O’Neill is lecturer in journalism and programme leader for the MSc in investigative journalism, Department of English Studies, University of Strathclyde. A journalist in print, broadcast and multimedia, he is currently completing his PhD looking at the implications of Watergate for UK and US journalism and presenting investigations for BBC Radio Scotland.

There’s an old Chinese proverb which I have pinned in my home-office which says: ‘Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I will remember.’ This is one of my favourite quotes from many I’ve collected over the past 20 years as a professional journalist. Yes, it might be clichéd, but for me personally it nails down the essence of what teaching journalism in the Department of English Studies at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow is all about.

Not everyone believes journalism can or should be ‘taught’ of course. Once upon a time becoming a journalist in the UK was a predictable process where you needed to know someone to get your foot in the door, be willing to work your way up the ladder from local newspapers, navigate a class system between tabloids and broadsheets and learn your trade by trial and error and hope to God you didn’t get sued. And you’d better be a man too, unless you wanted to spend four decades writing pieces on fashion and babies for the ‘women’s’ page.

Thankfully, things have changed quite a bit. Universities up and down the UK now offer a range of degrees, both undergraduate and postgraduate, which aren’t just about training for the day-to-day job, but provide serious education for students wanting to enter the world of journalism. Not all journalism is taught within English departments, but at Strathclyde it is. We now offer a respected undergraduate degree as part of our innovative Journalism & Creative Writing programme and a range of postgraduate courses in everything from straightforward Journalism, to International Journalism and also Investigative Journalism.

One of the long-acknowledged key challenges of offering journalism degrees at any level is simply getting the mix right between the core practical elements of courses and the wider academic content. It’s a delicate mix that’s easy to get wrong and hard to get right. If a course relies too heavily on practical work, it tips into the territory of being a vocational training course – not journalism education. However, if too much theory is offered, then it becomes an academic education in media studies or communications – again not journalism education.

The USA has led the way over the past 40 years in bringing journalism into university curriculums. In part, this was down to the profile of its unique marketplace and the CVs of its practitioners. From the 1960s onwards, it became expected for even local journalists to have gained a college or university degree before entering the business in America. For complex reasons, the story in the UK has been different. Lucrative and exciting jobs still exist in the tabloid sector, for example, where less importance is attached to higher degrees. Local newspapers, to mention another example, have often been keener on comprehensively covering official sources of news (e.g. courts, police, local councils) and therefore supporting training which emphasised knowing the rules and laws, as opposed to aggressively unearthing hidden facts or challenging
needs to understand the wider global
colleagues address the students’
sectors. At Strathclyde I am lucky to
journalism, media and communications
contributions to ongoing debates in
to journalists the value of academic
– also must take a lead in conveying
me – a mix of journalist and academic
enjoyable practical methods of teaching
theory is mixed and linked to robust and
students when cutting-edge academic
law and medicine, seems to work best for
In fact, it seems to me, journalism, like
bewilderment and contempt.
same pursuit of excellence in journalism
they needed a bypass, yet they treat the
gain access to the most skilled surgeon if
lawyers for any legal problems or fight to
who would brag about hiring the finest
every country. These are the same people
teaching journalism have themselves
been educated to at least undergraduate
level and, more often than not, Masters
Level and beyond. This was not always
the case and, it should be recognised,
some chips on shoulders still exist among
the industry’s dinosaurs who simply wish
to turn the clock back to a golden age
which never existed and who are absurdly
suspicious of well-educated journalists
– and academic colleagues – and any
courses taught by them on any campus in
any country. These are the same people
who would brag about hiring the finest
lawyers for any legal problems or fight
gain access to the most skilled surgeon if
they needed a bypass, yet they treat the
same pursuit of excellence in journalism
education with a contradictory mix of
bewildment and contempt.
In fact, it seems to me, journalism, like
law and medicine, seems to work best for
students when cutting-edge academic
teachers and students
professional practice. More often than not,
notes were required as evidence in a
a real-life example however, where such
students aren’t too keen on. Introducing
a transcription of taped notes, plus retaining
notes as evidence in a
investigative cases. Clearly, for reasons
of me in the dock manages to awaken
students aren’t too keen on. Introducing
a real-life example however, where such
notes were required as evidence in a
a murder case or where a journalist was
ordered to reveal a source by a court,
and teach. I see no confl ict between the
underlines the importance of best
professional practice. More often than not,
this is done by showing them letters from
lawyers I have tangled with during nasty
investigative cases. Clearly, for reasons
I don’t want to guess at, the prospect
of me in the dock manages to awaken
even the sleepiest of students previously
impressed by the thorny hedgerows of
media law.
At first I was wary of using such case
studies I’d worked on, since if it’s done
thoughtlessly and with minimum effort
it looks like teaching-by-anecdote and

At first this combination of Journalism and Creative
Writing might seem like a marriage of opposites.

Edwards, who teaches and researches
forms of life writing). The Strathclyde
course itself was conceived to refl ect the
link which exists between the disciplines
of creative writing and journalism. As such,
it is quite modern in its recognition of
the current popularity of long-form non-
nction narrative articles, the kind which
are often transformed by scriptwriters into
‘Based on a True Story’ movie magic. In
such contexts it is important for would-be
journalists, like would-be fiction writers,
to learn solid characterisation, dramatic
tension, plot pacing and so on.
At first this combination of Journalism
and Creative Writing might seem like a
marriage of opposites. In reality, it’s highly
attractive to both teachers and students
currently applying for the course. More
than ever, as online platforms offer more
ways to research and deliver journalism,
it’s important that technology doesn’t
overwhelm the content: the means cannot
be allowed to ever become the message.
At Strathclyde, Creative Writing students
have access to published poets, novelists,
playwrights and biographers. The classic
requirements of all good fl ctional works –
story, plot, character, narrative arc and so
on – are imparted by staff that have done
it and are doing it. The same is true
on the journalism side of the degree,
and on a good day the opposite sides
of the coin complement and reinforce
the other, with the golden thread being
high-quality writing.
Journalism students are assessed
through continuous assessment pieces
which are a mix of traditional reporting
exercises (e.g. court reporting) and
journalists referred to on this course – like
Hemingway and Orwell – only gained
power in their non-fiction writing by
displaying a degree of controlled swagger
in their prose. The core rule I derive from
such examples is that all writing must be
factual verifi ably and conform to basic
industry standards – apart from that,
students are positively encouraged to be
themselves and develop their own styles.
In the classes I teach, I always mix both the
practical and the theoretical. I’ve always
felt it was important for students to know
why they are learning something, as much
as showing them how to do it. This is not
as easy as it sounds. For example, the
apparently tedious task of news gathering,
which might involve shorthand or the
transcription of taped notes, plus retaining
additional notes from calls, interviews or
e-mails, is often something less-organised
students aren’t too keen on. Introducing
a real-life example however, where such
notes were required as evidence in a
mugger case or where a journalist was
ordered to reveal a source by a court,
underlines the importance of best
professional practice. More often than not,
this is done by showing them letters from
lawyers I have tangled with during nasty
investigative cases. Clearly, for reasons
I don’t want to guess at, the prospect
of me in the dock manages to awaken
even the sleepiest of students previously
impressed by the thorny hedgerows of
media law.
even ego-led practice. But with some perspective, critical analysis and, most importantly of all, using serious and thoughtful feedback from students themselves, it is possible to use my own – and others’ I’m familiar with – case studies to hook students from day one and make them realise how important it is to think beyond the walls of the lecture theatre.

Additionally, all undergraduate and postgraduate students are welcomed to the ‘Innocence Project’ I recently launched. These campus-based initiatives – which originally started in the USA – allow students to work on real cases where miscarriages of justice have allegedly occurred. They deal with real documents, forensic reports and witness statements. It’s an area I know well from my professional investigative work in print and broadcast. The goal for us at Strathclyde is to produce compelling journalism and catapult the cases back into the appeal courts.

There are, inevitably, some limitations in the case study approach. For one thing, not all case studies lend themselves to profile in the industry while still being a full-time lecturer. I’ve sometimes found this exhaustive but also worthwhile, as there are real rewards in the classroom where I can put some of my minor successes – and many more failures – to good use. The students relish being taught by someone who they can read, hear and see is still actively trying to practise what’s being preached. The case studies open up the industry to them and make it feel accessible and relevant. If I show an example where I fall flat on my face, so be it: students learn from my mistakes and it helps them to avoid repeating them.

One area I have found some modest professional success in is investigative journalism, which is commonly regarded as one of the toughest, but also most satisfying, fields to work in. It’s also impossible to teach this, I believe, without having done it and still be doing it. Being able to teach a class which begins with the finished article then, piece by piece, reverse engineer it, dismantling it systematically, and revealing how each part came about, is my most enjoyable teaching method. I use case studies involving everything I’ve covered, from murders, to terrorist attacks, to apparent suicides, to wrongful convictions to help students understand how aiming for memorable journalism means adhering to disciplined rules of research and then shooting for superb storytelling while using websites, blogging and even Facebook to unpack the tales in new ways.

I’ve seen evidence that underpinning the case study approach with a serious nod to the social justice mission of journalism (not always something British journalists are keen on pushing) really engages the students where I can put some of my minor successes – and many more failures – to good use. The students relish being taught by someone who they can read, hear and see is still actively trying to practise what’s being preached. The case studies open up the industry to them and make it feel accessible and relevant. If I show an example where I fall flat on my face, so be it: students learn from my mistakes and it helps them to avoid repeating them.

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I’ve seen evidence that underpinning the case study approach with a serious nod to the social justice mission of journalism (not always something British journalists are keen on pushing) really engages the current generation of students I meet.

In my student days (the 1980s), the likes of John Pilger’s documentaries, World in Action and early Channel 4 documentaries filled this inspirational role. That’s all changed of course, but decent-sized audiences still engage with Michael Moore’s polemical work, Channel 4’s Dispatches and a host of other sources. I’m fortunate enough to know many practitioners as colleagues or friends, and encourage my students to read their work and then contact the authors at their private e-mail addresses (which I’ve arranged beforehand) with questions as part of their coursework. In this way I am genuinely trying to break down walls, help students meet the best in the business and begin to map out what’s creatively possible in their careers and professions.

Consequently, it’s no surprise to me that student journalists become engaged and proactive at a faster rate if they feel really involved in the case they’re studying. In recent years I’ve managed groups of up to 50 in one class, working on miscarriage of justice cases (including the Jill Dando murder) and handling real, never-before-made-public documents and case papers. Their progress was startling and heartening: legal, social, psychological and forensic issues were confronted, naturally, since they soon popped up in the papers being handled. The legal challenges of publishing also reveal themselves in short order and students went on their own journeys of discovery and learning as they sought, fought and argued with lawyers about the rights and wrongs of what they wanted to write about. By using the case study method, curriculum topics were covered in half the time spent on traditional close study of texts. I appreciate that case study teaching – whether one’s own or borrowed from others – might not work for everyone and, in fact, I still use textbooks too – there are many excellent ones. But I do genuinely believe that building in some element of the case study approach will yield results in the class and in practice.

Journalism is going through a tough time right now – the printed press in particular is taking a thumping – yet great journalism still thrives. Some recent developments in the States have been heartening: the ‘Politico’ website (www.politico.com), for example, for Washington political junkies started as website and now sells a print edition, and if I want to know what’s happening on Capitol Hill, that’s my first port of call. Additionally, some of the best investigative work for newspaper outlets has, paradoxically, been on their websites (see the Washington Post’s 12-part series online into the Chandra Levy murder case).
And newsgathering has changed – and will again – as reporters begin to use and engage with new online technological tools. The recent upheavals in Iran and China wouldn’t have been known, nor shaped, had the media not accessed and interrogated Twitter and other social-networking sites.

This is exciting and compelling stuff, and the challenge for journalists and educators – sometimes the same person – is to stay relevant and teach what works and what matters in the new decades of the 21st century.

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**Additional Information**

University of Strathclyde  
[www.strath.ac.uk/english/courses/journalismcreativewritingundergraduate/](http://www.strath.ac.uk/english/courses/journalismcreativewritingundergraduate/)

Eamonn O’Neill’s professional site  
[www.eamonnoneill.net/](http://www.eamonnoneill.net/)

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**Weathering the Storm:**

**a networking day for humanities careers advisers**  
**July 2009, University of Liverpool**

For careers advisers, the current economic clouds have a silver lining: although it is harder for graduates to find graduate jobs, humanities students need less encouragement to make use of Careers Services than previously, and some institutions are making extra money available to improve services.

**Paul Redmond**, Head of the Careers Service at Liverpool, portrayed the current employment situation for graduates with a set of ‘crunchonomics’ statistics and concluded that the era of ‘employability’ has passed. With 80 graduates competing for every graduate job, vacancies down 17%, and most people graduating with a 2:1, it’s now more about attitudes than skills. (As one of the employers present said, ‘A 2:1 unlocks the door, it doesn’t open it’.) Qualifications are taken as a given, and graduates need something more, usually acquired via extra-curricular activities, to make them stand out from the crowd. Paul admitted that, sadly, there is a class dimension at work here, with middle-class parents more adept at giving their children the broader experiences, and finding them the internships, that will lead to that important ‘first job’. Indeed, Liverpool is helping its students to find internships to try to level the playing field.

For the humanities student, the implication is that s/he can no longer regard university as a pleasant interlude before beginning the process of finding a job. That process needs to begin from the first year, so that they have time to gather the ideas and experiences they need in order to be well placed when it comes to job hunting at the end of the final year. You might want to point your students towards the Subject Centre’s ‘After English’ website [www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/afterenglish/](http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/afterenglish/), which is full of ideas and activities to encourage students in career planning.

But the day was far from being all doom and gloom. For many companies outside finance it’s ‘business as usual’, and one of the employers present from food retail said he was taking on more graduates than the year before. But there is a problem in that students, panicked by the press and no doubt prodded by anxious parents, are making dozens of applications to organisations they have no real knowledge of or interest in. (One recruiter from a large supermarket told of reading an application that waxed lyrical about why the applicant was committed to a career in the company and concluded that he ‘really, really wanted to work for Shell’.) Faced with a flood of poor applications, top firms are using ‘Weapons of Mass Rejection’, and there is some fear that equal opportunities may be suffering as a consequence.

It was, however, apparent that Careers Services are gearing up to the new ‘AD’ (After-the-Downturn) era and there is a real will to help humanities students through the difficult times. In the afternoon, several Careers Services demonstrated how they are doing this using a variety of innovative methods: videos, internship and enterprise modules and graduate case studies to name but a few. Careers advisers are ready and willing to help students cope with a credit-crunch world – students should make good use of them!

**Jane Gawthrope**  
*English Subject Centre*
Launched to mark the 90th Anniversary of Armistice on 11 November 2008, The First World War Poetry Digital Archive (www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit) promises to be one of the richest resources on the web to support the teaching and study of literature that emanated from the First World War. The story begins early. In 1996–1998 the University of Oxford led a pioneering digitisation project that photographed the manuscripts, letters and war records of the poet Wilfred Owen. These were then released freely onto the web with additional online tutorials and tools for researchers. An influential project that was cited regularly in print and online publications, it boasted the first web-based tutorial to teach English literature, centred on the poet Isaac Rosenberg and his poem ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’. Building upon its success, in 2007 Oxford received further funding of £400,000 from the UK’s Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) to expand the archive’s content by adding collections of other poets and to embed these firmly within scholarly practices.

The expansion of the archive was not an easy task to address. Thousands of poems were written during the First World War. The historian Catherine Reilly has counted a total of 2,225 published poets between 1914 and 1918 in Britain alone (Todman, 2005: 153). When one takes into account retrospective verse written after the war then this is just the tip of the iceberg. To navigate this mass we have traditionally encountered First World War poetry through anthologies (Hibberd, 2008: 107), the most frequently found poets now constituting the canon of the genre. These ‘greatest’, and most ‘essential’ poets are now staple inclusions on literature syllabi across the educational landscape. In its selection of material, the archive did not seek to readdress the canon, nor did it consciously seek to define what was ‘worth’ making available. Selection was primarily based on user demand and archival collections that were available for digitisation, with supporting literary estates. Collections exist for the soldier poets Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Edward Thomas, Ivor Gurney, Edmund Blunden and David Jones. A further category was also touched upon with the inclusion of Vera Brittain, that of poetry written by those who experienced the war not through combat, but from home, through auxiliary work (Brittain was a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse) and through the pain of losing loved ones. The inclusion of her fiancé Roland Leighton (who also wrote a small number of poems), provides a meaningful insight into combat versus non-combat experiences of war, and the challenges this posed within relationships.

The collections themselves consist of primary source material relating to the poets. This consists mainly of images of poetical manuscript variants written during the war, and occasionally retrospective verse where the poet had survived and attempted to communicate their experience. This is supported by a full-text corpora of the published versions of the poems. The archive is accessible to all, completely free of charge. All 12,000 items that are made available from its pages can
be downloaded and used by researchers, lecturers, teachers and students to support teaching and expand learning in creative and innovative ways.

The value of viewing manuscripts is perhaps highlighted most vividly when browsing those of Isaac Rosenberg. As a private who lived for three years in the trenches on the Western Front among the carnage, his writing exists on scraps of YMCA paper that have become fragile with time, written in smudged pencil, torn and marred with water and mud. The manuscripts themselves are stained with a historical context that one simply cannot divorce from the verses it overlays.

Now that the collection of ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ is virtually reassembled, each one of the variants can be viewed in the online archive, side-by-side, a task that in the physical world is impossible.

Context is an ‘inescapable impingement’ on the poetry of the First World War (Silken, 1972). Owen, in his handwritten preface to his planned first collected edition wrote – ‘My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity’ – highlighting that one needs to understand the context that the poetry grew from to read it effectively and also that one can learn a little about the context through reading the poetry. Just like the mud stains on Rosenberg’s poetical works, literature and circumstance overlay each other and, recognising this, the online archive also supplies a rich array of additional contextual material.

Weaving among the poetry manuscripts and fragments are selections of letters, diary extracts, photographs and the service records of the poets. We can read the letters that Graves sent to Sassoon from a field hospital describing his experience of being reported dead in the Battle of the Somme. We can study the correspondences of Rosenberg to Gordon Bottomly on suggested edits to his poetry. There is Owen’s letter to his mother from the ‘smoky cellar’, his last station before he was killed in battle. Poems were often sent home in letters, the correspondence a harrowing reminder of the conditions that they were written in. In a similar vein, we can see the concaved pages of Thomas’s war diary disfigured by the shell blast that took his life, Jones’s extensive notes for ‘In Parenthesis’, the anguish and entries of Brittain on the death of her fiancé and the annotated pages from the scrapbook Edmund Blunden compiled after the war to try and comprehend and formalise the experiences he underwent on the Western Front. With the latter the family have said that the scrapbook was the beginnings of an annotated version of ‘Undertones of War’, and it seems fit that in the online archive Blunden’s poetry, and selected extracts from the book, lie alongside items of history and memory he himself was collecting.

Alongside the collections that relate specifically to the poets we have a rich array of contextual material drawn from the Imperial War Museum and Oxford’s John Johnson Collection, which further expands upon the key physical, emotional and mental experiences of the war that are the focus of many of the poems. Photographs, audio and video footage, as well as publications of war, such as trench papers and journals, can be easily browsed and searched. There is also a collection of over 6,500 items originating from the war, submitted by the general public (The Great War Archive). This collection of letters, postcards, photographs, autograph books, poetry, memorabilia and much more provides alternative literatures and gives a stage to the ‘silent voices’ of the war (Noakes: 2006). What might this add to the study of literature? Moving back to Owen’s ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, the student who is perhaps unfamiliar with the history of the First World War can easily explore the archive to discover a vast range of resources to provide a context to the poem. A simple search of ‘gas’ reveals photographs taken on the Western Front, video footage of gas drills and audio clips of veterans describing the horrors of the introduction of chemical warfare. The Great War Archive reveals a multitude of stories of men who suffered gas attacks, their lives now remembered by a series of mementos that have been preserved by their families. The irony of Owen’s poem is illustrated with context, why ‘guttering’ was chosen becomes clear.
The archival holdings provide a sea of material to capture minds, facilitate learning and provide new avenues of investigation. But, as with any archive, it can sometimes be a daunting task to navigate such a wealth of data. Working closely with lecturers and teachers of First World War Literature and related studies (e.g. history, women’s studies etc), the archive also provides a range of supporting educational materials for both higher and compulsory education. A series of online tutorials provide introductions to topics such as close reading (via Rosenberg’s ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’), manuscript studies and concepts of remembrance. Each tutorial includes a degree of interactivity, either requiring the student to record their thoughts or engage in online quizzes to test knowledge or question prejudices. Downloadable resource packs are available for teachers, consisting of a selection of images, adaptable PowerPoints and teachers’ notes revolving around a particular theme. In addition, a series of podcasts of interviews with key commentators on the First World War, recordings of relevant conferences and talks, short educational movies and audio tours can all be downloaded and played on any mobile device.

Moving away from the ‘off the shelf’ resources, the site makes use of freely available web-based tools to explore relationships that were perhaps previously hidden or difficult to navigate. In a tutorial on text analysis, the student is introduced to simple tools that enable them to compare the language used by the poets. The corpora of each poet is made available as full text files that can be downloaded and uploaded to tools like ‘Wordle’. This produces tag clouds which instantly reveal, for example, similarities in religious language and use of body imagery between the poets, providing a platform upon which students can begin to identify common themes and intertextualities. Likewise, the user can also plot the key events, letters and manuscripts for each poet onto an interactive timeline which overlays the key events of the First World War, again providing an interesting insight into the relationship of literature and context. Interactive mind maps on the relationships between the poets and other luminaries of the time can be launched in the freely available VUE software, which can also be used to graphically map relationships between concepts, ideas and digital content. The path creation tool gives users the means to create their own annotated trail through the archival resources. This allows you to add notes, pose questions and link to other resources on the Web and facilitates the creation of simple online tutorials, presentations and exhibitions which can then be made available to students or, alternatively, used by students themselves to create and share their own paths.

Online, the poetry becomes edgeless. No longer confined by the covers of the printed anthology, intermingled with alternative readings and historical context, and supported by carefully designed non-didactic educational materials, it comes alive. The archive has been designed to inspire both educators, researchers and students by offering rich, engaging content and the tools to interact with it.

Further Information


References


Creative Pedagogies

Upcoming Event

Breaking Boundaries

Lancaster University welcomes you to the Northwest Network for English and Linguistics Pedagogy

In-line with the English Subject Centre’s aim to develop a series of regional teaching networks to encourage discussion of the teaching of English, the Northwest Network for English and Linguistics Pedagogy will research and share good practice in the teaching of English language, literature and creative writing. The network aims to bring together all the areas of the English Subject Centre remit (English language, Literatures in English and creative writing) along with the Linguistics part of the Linguistics, Languages and Area Studies, thus enabling discussion across these areas as well as within them.

This first meeting of the Network, to which anyone from an HE institution in the north-west is invited, will be held at Lancaster University on 12 November 2009 (lunch and afternoon tea will be provided). The meeting will refine these aims and explore the synergies between the above four teaching areas. The afternoon will involve a pedagogical event to help us explore the relationships between the four areas of teaching, which traditionally have been separated by disciplinary boundaries. To do this, we will focus on a short poem, ‘Tunnel’ from The Ice Age, by Paul Farley, which can be accessed online from the Poetry Archive (www.poetryarchive.org).

We will also draw up a programme of events for the first year and plans for the future which will include practical opportunities to break the boundaries among the subject areas in English teaching.

To find out more, register and see the proposed working arrangements for the Network, please visit www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/events/event_detail.php?event_index=262 in the Events area of the English Subject Centre website.

Willem Hollmann, Kevin Watson (Department of Linguistics and English Language), Alison Findlay (Department of English & Creative Writing) and Mick Short (Department of Linguistics and English Language) discuss texts for the ‘Breaking Boundaries’ workshop.
Amy Palko offers some practical suggestions for integrating YouTube into tutorials and lectures.

The screen on the laptop becomes animated as a figure of a woman fidgets awkwardly in front of a microphone. The camera takes in the mocking scepticism of those sitting in the audience and the cynical raised eyebrow of the critical music mogul judge. The background music begins and the woman starts to sing, her voice soaring with a clear resonance evidently astounding to the attendant crowd. The clip lasts only minutes, streamed directly from source to computer, and yet it has been watched by millions and has generated a media storm leading to international news coverage, tabloid frenzy, Oprah interviews and a week’s retreat to ‘The Priory’. Surely this is the power of the Internet, and, more specifically, the power of YouTube.

An underestimated educational resource

And yet, the power of YouTube as an educational resource is still largely underestimated, as it is currently more famous for its facilitation of Britain’s Got Talent singer Susan Boyle’s hyperbolic rise to international celebrity than for its usefulness to the university teacher. However, the video-sharing website surely deserves recognition as a valuable tool in the university teacher’s arsenal, rather than be disregarded as a fame machine for the talented few and the talentless many. Often considered the home of the bizarre and the banal, YouTube is frequently overlooked as a resource for the lecture theatre or tutorial room; however, its potential to engage students, to provide them with a visual connection to abstract literary theory, and to contribute to their understanding of context is too important to ignore. For teachers of English literature, in particular, there exists a wealth of material to enliven any lesson, that could not only capture the interest of a student struggling through some of the more dense texts on the reading list, but could also spark illuminating discussion, inspire new thought and increase the level of participation. The generation which is currently coming through the university undergraduate system is an extremely visually literate one; what YouTube allows you to do as a teacher is harness this visual literacy and use it to shed light on text, context and theory.

While also being increasingly visually literate, our students are also committed and savvy users of the Internet and the many different forms of social media for which the Internet provides a platform. The power of social media, partly because of its constantly evolving nature, can be difficult to channel within an educational establishment, which is unaided by the general perception of social networking sites, such as Twitter, Facebook and Bebo, as media which exist almost solely as vehicles for procrastination. I would be lying if I were to tell you that this were not the case; certainly many hours are lost through the act of updating statuses. However, the way in which these sites are being used by some should not blind us to the fact that the facilities they offer can be turned to educational use. This is being researched and, indeed, put into practice by many individuals and institutions throughout the world. If you are one of those who have either developed a resistance to the inclusion of social media into your teaching or if you have found yourself in an institution currently dragging its heels on the issue of digital media as an educational resource, then read on.
With or without the right equipment
I admit to being an avid user of social media; I find it exciting in its potential and scope and can see its value for use in various forms. When I began teaching, I took this enthusiasm into my tutorials. Initially, I was teaching in rooms that were not equipped with the technology which would have allowed me to bring the Internet fully into my teaching. Consequently, my use of YouTube, in particular, had to be managed by circuitous route, in that I downloaded the clips that I required onto my laptop prior to my class, in order to still make use of this valuable resource. The student response to the inclusion of YouTube clips was very positive, with many connections to the course material forged through the use of clips to initiate discussion and to concretise the abstract. Subsequently, I was fortunate enough to teach in rooms which were fully wired up to the Internet, thus allowing me to improvise while teaching; if I thought extra historical context would be appreciated and appropriate to the class, then, having carefully prepared, I could quickly find a relevant clip to illustrate. This flexibility allowed me to be responsive to the needs of the class, through the freedom to pursue lines of thought, and to build upon areas of interest initiated by the class themselves.

Classroom practice
Some specific examples will help to explain the way that I use YouTube in my teaching and, hopefully, inspire you to take the principles behind my choice of clips and explore the uses of YouTube in your teaching and, hopefully, inspire you to take

the principles behind my choice of clips and sets the result to a specific soundtrack. This type of clip is increasingly common on YouTube, with many movie enthusiasts creating their own music videos while condensing the narrative down from 90 minutes to three and a half. By showing this clip to my class I was able to remind them of the basic differences in that narrative which has been so influential in the reception of that specific fairy tale in the popular culture consciousness and then compare it with Carter’s treatment of the tale.

The second clip I showed during that class was a short film called Dysenchanted (2004), directed by Terri Edda Miller, which is available in its entirety on YouTube, and which shares the final minutes of a counsellor-led support group for fairy-tale heroines. The group features, among others, Little Red Riding Hood, Goldilocks and Sleeping Beauty, all of whom are suffering from various conditions ranging from obsessive-compulsive disorder to narcolepsy. It also features, however, a divorced single mother from New Jersey whose role demonstrates the ways in which contemporary feminine identities are constructed through the tropes of fairy-tale narratives and their popular re-imaginings. As a group within the tutorial, we addressed this short film as a text in and of itself, and then compared it to Carter’s short stories. In this way, clips on YouTube can be used to offer a secondary text which may serve to contrast the literary text in question, or which may be used as a way of introducing a range of central points to structure the rest of the discussion. There are many short films, animations and narrative-based music videos which can be utilised in this way, with the added benefit that, by providing the URL to your students, they can be watched again after the class as they are all readily available on the Internet.

One thing that YouTube has shown us, though, is that consumption is only one side of the coin.

From fairy tales to body lotion
Another kind of clip frequently available on YouTube is television adverts. Short, familiar, image-focussed and with a high impact, adverts can often be used as a way to explore abstract theory by illustrating, in a tangible way, its contemporary relevance. One advert that I have used to great effect has been from the very successful ‘Dove’ advertising campaign, which attempts to refocus advertising away from the stereotypical ideals of femininity to address instead the physical form of ‘real’ women. I use Dove: Evolution, which features time-lapse photography as a bare-faced model is primped and preened, photographed and photoshopped before appearing on a billboard. This very short clip is extremely powerful, as it displays an issue of which many, if not all, of the class is aware and are affected by. Using this advert as a springboard, it becomes easier to begin discussing issues of gender theory, including ideas of essentialism and gender performance. By beginning the discussion by showing the concrete example illustrated in the advert, the students are able to make connections to the selected passages from theorist Judith Butler, for example, which they would have struggled to do so had we begun with jumping straight into the theory.

Historical, political and cultural contexts
YouTube can also help us to deliver a measure of context to our students, so as to facilitate their positioning of the course material into a historical, cultural, sociological background. Many television documentaries, made both in the UK and abroad, are uploaded onto YouTube and offer footage that will allow students to engage with their set texts in a way that may have been unachievable otherwise. I found this kind of clip particularly helpful when teaching the 20th-century American short story, as many of the narratives the course focussed on dealt with historic material. For example, filming that depicts the Great Depression and the Civil Rights Movement is available on YouTube, thus allowing students to attain a much deeper understanding of many of the themes recurrent throughout the short fiction. Similarly, when teaching a specific period, such as Modernism, YouTube allows you to access clips such as Charlie Chaplin’s Modern Times (1936), the original
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Choreography of Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* (1913) and slideshows of some of the most relevant artists to the period, such as Picasso.

**Author interviews**

Author interviews are another kind of clip which are particularly helpful and can lead to some interesting discussions on the positioning of the author, the reader and the text when critically engaging with literature. How does the author’s views on their work inform our own understanding? What are some of the main contexts that one can derive from the author’s personal background? How does the interview magnify or diminish the impact of the marketing of the text by the publishing industry? I have found this to be a very effective way of encouraging students both to value their own interpretation and to appreciate the triangulation of the production of texts from author to publishing industry to reader. However, I very rarely use an author interview to introduce a text, preferring to show the clip after some preliminary close reading and discussion of the text in question, so as to avoid any deference to the views held by the author regarding their own work. Another form of clip which provides authorial context is the news report. For example, when teaching *Blasted* (1995), by Sarah Kane, the playwright’s suicide plays an important part in the context of her drama, and, therefore, I found a clip which addressed her death. This will be the case for some instances in which you may be teaching a text from an author whose life was or is particularly newsworthy. YouTube provides many news reports which may offer insight into not only the event itself, but also the way that it was treated in the media at the time.

**From consumers to creators**

All these examples of how YouTube can be employed in your teaching have focussed primarily on the ways in which YouTube can add to your delivery of content and the provision of discussion points. They are concerned with the integration of already produced clips in the tutorial. One thing that YouTube has shown us, though, is that consumption is only one side of the coin. YouTube, as with all social media, actively encourages the production of content, and it is this that I would like to introduce into my teaching in the near future. The technology to record one’s own clips is now incredibly accessible and easy to use, either through inbuilt webcams, digital cameras which possess a video setting, mobile phones or handheld Flip video cameras. Not only can you produce content for your students, such as providing a reading of an excerpt from *The Canterbury Tales* or advising on how one reads a poem aloud, but your students can also be set YouTube assignments. They can be asked to construct a video presentation, to respond on video to a clip already posted on the site or to provide images to compliment a piece of text. The applications of this medium are immensely varied and the potential for experimentation is huge.

In order to help you to make the most of this resource in your teaching, I would like to close with a few tips, the first of which pertains to finding relevant clips. The most obvious way, perhaps, is to spend an inordinately long period of time trying out search terms and wading through potentially relevant clips; however, I suggest either outsourcing this search by asking for suggestions on other social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, or you can work as a team. You can set up a Ning site in a matter of minutes very simply by following the instructions, and then invite your colleagues on the course’s teaching team to join. You can then post YouTube clips to the site along with a brief explanation of its value to that course. By working together, you can greatly reduce the time you would spend individually researching YouTube. My second tip concerns the display of the clips to your class, as this is the most crucial component of the integration of YouTube in your teaching. One method is to link directly to YouTube and stream the video live. This, however, can be problematic as occasionally clips are removed and you may be stranded high and dry searching for the elusive clip in front of a class of expectant students. A way to avoid this is to download the clip onto your desktop using a tool such as TubeSock (works on both Mac and Windows), which allows you to download clips from YouTube by typing in the desired URL. TubeSock then converts the clip into an MP4 file, making it easy to display as and when you need to. Lastly, YouTube clips should only be used when they add to your teaching, and should therefore be kept to a minimum. When used best, they generate discussion, encourage participation and facilitate engagement without overshadowing the literature we are teaching. The power of YouTube as an educational tool is truly great; all you need to do is look beyond the common perception of the medium and start using it to excite, inspire and engage your students.

**Using the Dove: Evolution advert as a springboard, it becomes easier to begin discussing issues of gender theory, including ideas of essentialism and gender performance.**

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**Further Reading and Watching**

YouTube  [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
Lay Lady Lay  [www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNgUiwEiR-l](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNgUiwEiR-l)
Dysenchanted  [www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2VeFQ5DHo0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2VeFQ5DHo0)
Dove: Evolution  [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tp7jP1XB9WY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tp7jP1XB9WY)
Charlie Chaplin Modern Times  [www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0XjrIvGfiw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0XjrIvGfiw)
Rite of Spring Part 1  [www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0XjrIvGfiw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0XjrIvGfiw)
Picasso  [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wJNc9Ez-LM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wJNc9Ez-LM)
Ning  [www.ning.com/](http://www.ning.com/)
Technology and Disability: outcomes from the HEAT scheme

Since 2006, the Higher Education Assistive Technology (HEAT) scheme has been providing lecturers with funding to allow them to experiment with the innovative use of ICT in teaching disabled students. The two most recent round of HEAT projects have now reported, providing a rich seam of information about the value and pitfalls of using learning technology. You can find detailed reports on all the HEAT projects on the TechDis website:

www.techdis.ac.uk/getheatscheme

HEAT is funded by the JISC, the government body for ICT in Higher Education, and administered by TechDis, the branch of the JISC responsible for uses of technology to improve accessibility for the disabled.

Lecturers across a wide range of disciplines have used HEAT funding to:

• create videos and podcasts for use in their teaching
• use videos created by students as a means of assessment
• require students to make reflective video diaries
• explore the use of mind-mapping software
• deliver audio files to mobile phones to help visually impaired students
• provide students with PDAs on which to keep portfolios of work
• provide dyslexic students with PDAs loaded with podcasts, mind-mapping and speech-recognition software
• test students using exercises loaded on handheld gaming devices (such as the Nintendo DS)
• transmit material from a field trip using mobile technologies
• use talking tactile tablets to support students with visual impairment
• assess the value of speech-recognition software for disabled students
• create new software for blind students
• allow PhD students to make introductory videos about their research work for undergraduates
• use video and other new technologies to provide mobility-impaired students with materials from field trips that would otherwise have been inaccessible
• use an electronic voting system in teaching
• use a portable interactive whiteboard to record teaching sessions
• create learning materials using Comic Life comic strip creation software
• compare the usefulness in pedagogy of different digital voice recorders
• compare the usefulness of a range of computer input devices

As will be obvious from this list, the value of many of the HEAT projects is not limited to work with disabled students. If you are currently using technology of this sort in your own classroom or would like to explore the possibilities further, please contact Jonathan Gibson at the Subject Centre (jonathan.gibson@rhul.ac.uk).

Undergraduate Creative Writing and e-Inclusivity

Dr Simon Perril, Heather Conboy, Dr Kathleen Bell, Anne Reck and Dr Jonathan Taylor, Creative Writing, De Montfort University, Leicester

HEAT funding enabled this project team to use three digital visualisers and remote controls to allow the display, and discussion, of student writing in classrooms equipped with a data projector. They were intended to foster ‘holistic’ e-inclusion by making en-masse discussion of work – with all the workshop-bonding potential this entails – an achievable goal without restricting the participation of students with hearing or visual impairments.

The visualisers were a great success: read more at http://tinyurl.com/m6dysf
Show your students the patterns of their written work and improve the attention they give to your feedback – it’s as easy as ticking a box, argues Dave Ellis.

Dave Ellis is a principal lecturer in English at the University of Wolverhampton. He is the author of Writing Home: Black Writing in Britain since the War (2007) and In at the Deep End? The first year in undergraduate English. English Subject Centre Report Series (2008).

At a recent networking day for heads of department convened by the English Subject Centre, the topic of students’ collection of assessed coursework assignments was discussed. Some common practices emerged: mandatory tutorials; return through timetabled classes; mass sessions where all uncollected assignments are made available; returning work by post etc. Most common, however, was a certain bafflement over why students would not want to collect their work and read tutors’ comments in the first place. In my own experience, such incomprehension can turn to consternation where subject teams are praised by external examiners for the quality of their feedback but also have piles of uncollected scripts in their offices and indifferent ratings from the National Student Survey on this very topic. How does it come to this?

One frequently cited explanation for this is the increasing tendency for institutions to allow students to access their grades online. This has the following possible consequences: a student is satisfied with the grade, puts the assignment behind him/her and moves on without seeing any need to revisit what is now finished work or, less frequently, a student is not happy with the grade and collects the work to search through tutors’ comments for an explanation for the mismatch of expectation and disappointment.

In each scenario, it is the ‘back’ in feedback that is important. For the satisfied student, there is nothing more to be learned from an assignment that has been successful in its own terms. For the unsatisfied student, it is all about resolving the conflict between their memory of the effort that went into the assignment and its assessed grade. Anecdotally, it seems as though these latter cases are becoming increasingly common, with the effect that tutors’ comments become defensive and aimed at justifying a grade to students who are more willing than ever, it seems, to go through appeals procedures. In either case, it’s the retrospective relationship of the comments to the completed work that determines their usefulness to students.

Feeding back, however, has never been the sole intention behind comments on essays. Certainly, such remarks should discuss the relative merits of the work in hand, but such commentary should also look forward, providing guidance on students’ general scholarly practice for future work.

One way in which feedback on essays can distinguish general advice from specific commentary is through the use of tickbox pro forma. Here, box diagrams allow tutors to tick various aspects of the essay – for example, ‘Use of English’ or ‘Knowledge of texts’ – on a range from ‘Excellent’ to ‘Very poor’. Theoretically, I thought that such tickbox sections, if viewed across the students’ whole programme (rather than in relation to the specific assignment), might reveal consistent patterns of relative strengths and weaknesses in their work. Over the course of the programme, students would respond to such patterns and ideally see ticks indicating weakness migrate across the page towards more positive ratings. Discursive commentary would still apply to the specific assignment, but the tickboxes would provide a visual and recursive point of reference for self-improvement. In short, there would be a clear developmental purpose that should encourage students to collect their work.

As I knew that such tickbox sections were in quite widespread use across UK English departments, I decided to survey existing examples in an attempt to identify aspects of most common and/or best practice to produce a template that might be widely adopted across the sector. I received examples of tickbox pro forma from a small, but fairly representative, sample of departments – just over 20 in total – and from these some interesting distinctions and correspondences emerged.
For example, the only section shared by all pro forma that used a tickbox element was one on academic presentation, indicating students’ correct presentation of (typically) book/article titles, long and short quotations, end/footnotes and bibliography. I thought there were probably two motivating factors here. First, once students have been issued with style guidelines, their subsequent application of such guidance can be simply correct or incorrect and a ticked box can indicate as much rather efficiently. Indeed, the frequency with which I find myself writing ‘Underline or italicise book titles – not both’ and ‘Do not offset short quotes’ on students’ work makes a simple tick very appealing. Second, from an intellectual and pedagogic perspective, subject teams may consider that English is, by definition, a discursive discipline that should resist any apparently reductive approaches to assessment. A student may be simply incorrect in their presentation of a bibliography, but can their reading of Byron be treated in an equivalent fashion? I think an instinctive reluctance to do so has meant that tickbox pro forma – rather like multiple choice questions – has been considered by some to be inappropriate for our discipline.

This reluctance might also explain the less frequent appearance of tickbox sections grading ‘Use of English’. In some instances this can also address technical qualities of spelling, punctuation and syntax where students can be simply wrong (for example, their misuse of the possessive apostrophe or confusing ‘their/there’).

However, where variations in the pro forma started to indicate more controversial ground, it was with the more subjective aspects of language use. The aspects referred to included ‘Clarity of expression’, the ‘Lively and engaged use of language’ or the ‘Structure of argument’, and were variously located either within the responses to the objective technical qualities of grammar and spelling or within the subjective responses to the intellectual qualities of ‘Critical analysis’ or ‘Originality’.

The quality of written expression clearly is a defining aspect of assessed work in English. An insightful textual analysis can be undermined by being poorly worded and organised in much the same way that a somewhat mundane analysis can be flattered by lucid and coherent written performance. However, while expressive qualities are assessed in English, they do not often feature as part of the taught programme itself where ‘content’ is given priority over ‘skills’. Here, the way in which these pro forma are designed do not only say something about the qualities we expect in an English student, but also say something about our own sense of the limits of our discipline. Two other features contribute to this thought: first, where additional support for a student’s writing style is required, it is often registered on some forms as a ticked box referring the student to a peer-mentoring or study support unit that exists outside of the department itself; second, this was the section where the term ‘appropriate’ was used (for example, ‘Clear and appropriate style’ or ‘Use of appropriate techniques’). I thought the term appropriate a strangely vague and not terribly instructive one in this context and therefore, perhaps, indicative of a certain nervousness in dealing with this category of student performance. Would a similar tension be evident in the intellectual qualities included in such pro forma?

Here there was considerably less consensus in the construction of the pro forma, not just in identifying shared intellectual qualities, but also in finding ways of succinctly defining them. For example, variations on the theme of ‘Knowledge’ and ‘understanding’ recur, but not in any consistent fashion. Sometimes, ‘Knowledge and Understanding’ was a fixed category; on other pro forma it is modified with phrases such as ‘Awareness of critical/theoretical debate’ or ‘Lively engagement with debates about the assignment question’. Similarly, ‘Quality of analysis’ (a capacity surely central to our discipline) was either a heading with subcategories (‘Skilful’, ‘Close’, ‘Makes a case’), a stand-alone category with space for comments or not present at all (again, presumably on the understanding that discursive feedback is the appropriate medium for such commentary).

This is not to suggest that the pro forma reveal an uncertainty about the intellectual qualities English departments expect from their students’ work. Rather, it is in the endeavour to find definitions of those qualities that both inform (in the way that ‘appropriate’ does not) and have wide application across more than one module or assignment. One way in which some pro forma have sought to achieve this is in carefully worded descriptors indicating a range of performance criteria. In one form, for example, an indicator of excellent performance is ‘Skilful close critical analysis’ and its corresponding description of poor performance is ‘Tendency to generalisation, description or plot summary’. The descriptors here define qualities that both evaluate the assignment in hand and identify general qualities that can be taken into future work. Such descriptors are also more informative for students than forms that provide only one descriptive statement (e.g. ‘Relevance to question’) that is assessed by ticking across a range from ‘Excellent’ to ‘Unsatisfactory’. I suspect they are also more helpful than descriptors that carry only an oppositional statement (‘Focussed on the question’ – ‘Not focussed on the question’). As one colleague suggested to me, a well-worded template that is blank should be as useful in advance of writing the essay as it is in assessing it afterwards.

Based upon this survey, I have put together a pro forma that brings together what I think are the best qualities from those I received. Putting it into use in a pilot study did reveal some immediate limitations: it was not always appropriate for assessments other than formal essays; its descriptors were not always relevant for English language or creative writing modules. But it is perhaps in the task of trying to author appropriate descriptors for different exercises and subjects – and in the process of sharing such efforts at definition among the wider subject community – that we can achieve a greater clarity on what defines our subject both for our students and for ourselves.

See Dave’s ideal pro forma in our online edition of WordPlay.
Dame Ellen Terry and Edith Craig: suitable subjects for teaching

Katharine Cockin provides an insight into a research project which has produced a new electronic resource, making accessible one of the most significant theatre archives in the UK.

Ellen Terry, the enigmatic performer who achieved worldwide fame in the late 19th-century, has inspired some of the world’s most distinguished artists, writers and biographers. In 1889, John Singer Sargent painted ‘Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth’ (1889), while in 1923 and 1935 Virginia Woolf wrote the play Freshwater about Terry. Terry’s life has been documented by distinguished literature academic Professor Nina Auerbach in the 1987 text Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time, and by renowned biographer Sir Michael Holroyd, in A Strange Eventful History (2008), a group biography of Terry, Henry Irving and their families. These and other works of art inspired by or devoted to Terry are invariably innovative and experimental, responding perhaps to the exceptional and often contradictory facets of this remarkable woman who also achieved great things in her private life, maintaining a family and pursuing her desires in and out of marriage.

The details of Ellen Terry’s life are now becoming more accessible. The first conference to be held on Ellen Terry and her daughter, Edith Craig (at the University of Hull on 6 June), included Holroyd, who spoke of Terry’s intimate and controlling relationship with her son, and Auerbach, whose lecture focussed on Terry’s ‘Lost Lives’. The conference was also the occasion for the launch of a new AHRC-funded online resource, describing one of the largest archives of its kind in the UK. It represents the culmination of over 20 years of my work in cataloguing the papers of Terry and Craig (over 20,000 items), which are owned by the National Trust. With few resources, the project began as a card index of Edith Craig’s papers and, eventually, with funding from the University of Hull and Society for Theatre Research, it grew into a database. But it was not until the award of £85,720 by the AHRC in 2006 that the project could be completed, with the help of Julian Halliwell at SimplicityWeb.co.uk, as an online database with its own website www.elleterryarchive.hull.ac.uk

While this resource was originally intended for researchers (in theatre studies, gender studies, literary studies and history of art), its brief summaries of the content of the papers provide a glimpse of the activities of Terry, Craig and their circle and make it useful and accessible to lecturers and teachers in various contexts.

Interdisciplinary study

Ellen Terry is one of the most famous of English performers, known especially for her work opposite Henry Irving at the Lyceum Theatre in the roles of Ophelia, Beatrice, Portia and Lady Macbeth. As the glittering Queen she is portrayed by John Singer Sargent holding the crown aloft. The costume she is wearing is currently receiving careful restoration work by the National Trust. Remarkably, its outer layer is crocheted and decorated with beetle wings. Sargent’s image provides a useful visual reference point in the classroom. It captures the imagination and conveys the power of the character in Shakespeare’s tragedy. The creation of the costume itself would, no doubt, fascinate younger students exploring technology, textiles and performance, especially how to interpret a character through costume and to consider the effects under specific forms of lighting. There was a great deal of debate at the recent conference at the University of Hull about Terry’s presentation in stage costume in photographs and the extent to which make-up and textiles operate metonymically and in relationship to the metaphorical dimension of the actor’s movement and gesture in time and space. Terry’s own published lectures on Shakespeare offer an actor’s insight into various aspects of his plays at a time when the actor’s status was only recently established. In this context, students might be set the question: How did the female performer in the 19th-century engage with the performance of Shakespeare? Terry’s lectures on Shakespeare’s women were appropriated by the women’s...
After 1915, the Pioneer Players became London’s Art Theatre, producing plays in translation by major authors such as Herman Heijermans, Torahiko Kori, Salvatore de Giacomo, Jose Echegeray, Nikolai Evreinov, Paul Claudel and Anton Chekhov. Anyone teaching 20th-century theatre and seeking to question the conventional theatre history of this period, which sees art theatre as exclusively taking place abroad, should make use of these productions, reviews of which are available in national newspapers.

The Pioneer Players also produced plays by George Bernard Shaw and Susan Glaspell, notably Trifles, one of the most canonical of feminist and American plays. As a lesbian, feminist and socialist, active in the British women’s suffrage movement and theatre, Craig has a fascinating place in 20th-century history. George Bernard Shaw noted that Edward Gordon Craig had become world famous by virtue of producing very few plays while his sister (Edith) was virtually unknown but had produced everything. In a level 6 Autobiography module I set the students an independent study exercise supported by VLE, to explore online biographical resources and produce a comparative analysis of entries for the same subject. This raised awareness of the authorship of reference material and deters students from regarding the Internet as a sea of anonymously authored data. In a seminar at MA level I have introduced an intertextual study of Between the Acts and Freshwater. The familiarity of Woolf’s writings to MA students and the unfamiliarity of her play, Freshwater, and the contextual information concerning Craig have produced some lively discussions and

Terry’s lectures on Shakespeare’s women were appropriated by the women’s suffrage movement in Britain and abroad.

reinvigorated the students’ approach to Woolf. The discovery of her life may be used in an exercise on using the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography as a biographical online resource or in the teaching of modernism. In seminars on biographical study skills, students may examine Terry’s birth, marriage and death certificates online at www.familyrecords.gov.uk/frc/extra/terry2.htm

Pedagogy and epistolary writing
Writing letters was the principal means of communication in Terry’s day, and she, more than most, was addicted to the practice. If she were alive today she would no doubt be queen of the Twitterati. More than 2,000 of her letters survive, providing a fascinating insight into the daily life of the actor, her struggles with her health and the maintenance of
the 19th-century as well as the gendered
unusual examples of familial interaction in
her junior. Terry's life story provides some
American actor, James Carew, 29 years
1907, when she was 60 years old, to the
ahead of her time in her fi nal marriage in
children outside marriage. She is also
having eloped with Edward Godwin, the
fi gure categorised as a ‘fallen woman’,
having eloped with Edward Godwin, the
famous architect and father of her two
children outside marriage. She is also
taken, it also revealed the assumption
that epistolary conventions might be
taught as well as learned. What can
letters tell us about their correspondent
and addressee? The MA students who
explored Ellen Terry's life in the ‘Family
Matters’ module were intrigued by the
detective work involved in dating letters
and dealing with difficult handwriting,
and it has enriched their understanding of
the published material, the extracts from
Terry's autobiography, biographies and her
published correspondence with George
Bernard Shaw.

Students are usually fascinated by
the visual form of Terry's epistolary
writings, her idiosyncratic but systematic
encoding of the text by means of multiple
underlinings; her invention of names
for herself and the invitation to her
addressees to rename themselves for the
purpose of their correspondence. Thus
she becomes Nell, Nellie, Ellen, Ellenor,
Ellenest, Old Gandy; Albert Fleming, the
friend who sent her daffodils from the Lake
District every spring, was Daffy; Pauline
Chase, one of the performers of Peter
Pan, became Sweet Polenta or Pollikins.
Using the online catalogue, students could
select ‘correspondence’ as a document

If Terry were alive today she would no doubt
be queen of the Twitterati.

Creative Pedagogies

her life bringing up two children – often
as a lone parent. In these respects, I have
used Terry as a case study in a seminar
on the module convened by Professor
Valerie Sanders, ‘Family Matters’, on the
MA in Victorian Studies at the University
of Hull. Ellen Terry is striking as a Victorian
figure categorised as a ‘fallen woman’,
having eloped with Edward Godwin, the
famous architect and father of her two
children outside marriage. She is also
nature of letter writing. Although the
examination of letters as primary texts
may be unfamiliar to literary students,
they will have encountered them in the
epistolary novel. In Samuel Richardson's
Pamela (1740), the servant girl's letters
become the object of her master's lust.
While the popular model letter-writing
manuals in the 18th-century demonstrated
the seriousness with which the letter,
as a representation of its author, was

The Ellen Terry and Edith Craig Database

By Julian Halliwell, SimplicityWeb.co.uk

How it was built

The database – freely available online at
http://ellenterryarchive.hull.ac.uk — has been designed
to present an easy to use, but powerful search interface to
the 20,000+ documents described in the catalogue. It was
developed over a period of approximately 12 months, beginning
with a prototype, a mock-up allowing Dr Cockin to see exactly
what the finished website would look like. This is a crucial stage
in the design process during which hidden issues and details
can be uncovered and worked through iteratively before any
programming is carried out. After several rounds of detailed
discussion and initial adjustments, feedback was sought from
invited colleagues to further improve and simplify the design.

Once the ‘front-end’ was agreed, work could begin
to construct the ‘back-end’ database, web and search
systems and transfer the originally collected data. A private
administration system was also built to allow the data to be
maintained, extended and exported to a printed catalogue.

How it works

The main way of interacting with the database is through
keyword searching (a convenient pop-up window beside
the search box offers search tips and examples). In addition
to familiar tools such as ‘Did you mean?’ suggestions and
‘search within’, a number of specially developed features are
unobtrusively available to help users find items relevant to
their interests:

• Tickboxes allow filters to be applied in any combination
to limit results to specific types of document (e.g. letters,
images, programmes etc) or those with particular attributes
(e.g. handwritten, annotated etc)

• For research or teaching programmes with a narrow
historical focus, a precise period may be specified,
benefiting from the systematic recording of dates, present
and inferred, wherever possible in the catalogue

• Where correspondence is the primary focus, boxes can
be ticked to search the names of letter writers and/or
recipients only

• A ‘search expansion’ facility operates behind the scenes
to match particular search terms and phrases to known
alternatives so that relevant results are not missed. For
example, a search for ‘James Carew’ will also match
documents containing only ‘Jim Carew’

Results are ordered by relevance and present the key
information for each matching document according to its
type, including dates and the first few lines summarising
its content. Each full record is displayed in a concise, print-
friendly format and includes details of any literary or other
works referenced. A number of suggested searches are
included on the website as a starting point. A detailed guide
to the collection, further reading and links are also provided.
type, collecting examples of pseudonyms used by correspondents and addressees. What data becomes available from a letter is not as straightforward as it might seem. In literary studies, letters are often used alongside autobiographies, as transparent repositories of data about a subject, informing the contextualisation of the literary text. However, within the field of auto/biography the letter itself becomes a resonant text, the location of words on the page a matter for interpretation and the process of dating and situating it in the broader historical landscape is one which usually grips the students’ imagination and naturally opens up a discussion of historicism and cultural materialism.

A suitably complex subject

In the field of auto/biography, Terry provides a complex subject since, she published her autobiography, The Story of My Life (1908) and, after her death, her daughter and her daughter’s partner revised and edited the text as Ellen Terry’s Memoirs (1933). Various possible questions arise from these texts, including the detective project of textual variants. The way in which Terry deals with the details of her children, born outside marriage in 1869 and 1872, is an intriguing example of storytelling and the magisterial evasion of the ‘fallen woman’ role. Philippe Lejeune’s concept of the ‘autobiographical pact’ may be introduced into the discussion of Terry’s relationship to the reader of her life story. To what extent does she present the kind of truth on offer as one which is embedded in the theatrical and, at times, even the gothic rather than a straightforward contract of verifiable data? Artistic – or performative – license is somehow understood from the start; it is, after all, ‘the story’ of her life. It is the only one she has on offer. It is quite different from the stories which emerge from her archive and from the thousands of letters she wrote.

The English Subject Centre Report Series

Our Report Series is now well established. Copies of all reports are available on our website at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/general/publications/reports, and most are circulated in paper form to English departments in the UK. Further copies are available on request, subject to availability. Send your request to esc@rhul.ac.uk

Recent Reports

In at the Deep End? The First Year in Undergraduate English Literature

Teaching the Teachers: Higher Education and the Continuing Professional Development of English Teachers
Creative Pedagogies

Theorising the Teaching of Creative Writing

An English Subject Centre project led by Nigel McLoughlin fills a gap in the market with the creation of a website and online journal focussed on theories of teaching Creative Writing.

As part of the MA in Creative & Critical Writing at the University of Gloucestershire, students may take a module on Teaching Creative Writing, which covers both the hands-on practice of running workshops and the academic study of important texts related to the pedagogy of Creative Writing. Much of what is written deals in a very practical way with the teaching methods employed by teachers of Creative Writing. Case studies of successful exercises and teaching methods abound. It is much less common for books and articles to deal with the educational and creative theories that underpin these practices.

In order to help my own students (and others facing similar questions) I decided to apply to the English Subject Centre for project funding to set up a central resource which would provide a focus and a locus for these discussions. I knew that colleagues were interested in research and scholarship related to the pedagogy of Creative Writing, and I knew of several colleagues who had also published articles, and I knew that there was a need for an outlet which would provide a focus and a locus for these discussions. I knew that colleagues were interested in research and scholarship related to the pedagogy of Creative Writing, and I knew of several colleagues who had also published articles, and I knew that there was a need for an outlet which specialised in the area. I felt that such an outlet could prove invaluable not just to students but to early career lecturers also, since there had, until fairly recently, been no formal training available in the pedagogy of Creative Writing.

In the early stages, I saw a new resource – a database – as a way of gathering together articles related to the pedagogy of Creative Writing in a way that would make them easily accessible to students and new lecturers. Discussions with English Subject Centre staff Nicole King and Brett Lucas helped me to focus the idea and to think through its structure. I wanted to attract contributions of scholarly articles and to stimulate debate on how Creative Writing is taught and discussion of the theoretical aspects that underpin the way the discipline is taught. I saw the resource as a sort of ‘one stop shop’ for students and new lecturers, which would provide a store of information that could be developed and added to over time. This information could include exercises colleagues had found successful, book reviews and hints and tips as well as articles.

As the project progressed however, the journal became the centrepiece with the resources section forming a satellite around it. The main reasons for this appeared to be that the journal offered the opportunity to publish new scholarship and research, which contributors found attractive and, initially at least, the people interested in the site were predominantly experienced teachers. I obtained an ISSN number for the journal, since that was crucial to Australian colleagues. The biggest problem faced in the early stages was one of profile. I had no tangible product, merely the promise of an online, peer-reviewed ‘something’. Academics tend to be fairly cautious creatures and they needed to be sure that their articles could be entered into their respective research assessment exercises. The list of peer reviewers also helped to assure contributors that the journal would publish articles of a high calibre and that if their article was accepted, that it would be in good company.

The peer review panel was recruited from colleagues whom I knew to have a strong interest in Creative Writing pedagogy. I was lucky enough to bring on board a number of senior academics from the field, all of whom had both extensive teaching experience and a strong profile in area of pedagogy. I wanted to have a panel that was balanced in terms of the epistemologies that the reviewers shared and their particular areas of interest. Nigel McLoughlin is Reader in Creative Writing at the University of Gloucestershire and Course Leader for the MA in Creative and Critical Writing. His areas of interest include the pedagogy of Creative Writing, new media and pedagogy and the creative process. His fifth collection of poetry is Chora: New & Selected Poems (Templar Poetry, 2009).

‘Creative Writing: Teaching Theory and Practice is an invaluable resource for teachers of Creative Writing. As a researcher and teacher in this subject, it finally provides a single base to work from to advance my own thinking, and somewhere ultimately to share the fruits of that work.’ – Calum Kerr, Lecturer in Creative Writing, Manchester Metropolitan University

Nigel McLoughlin

Nigel McLoughlin is Reader in Creative Writing at the University of Gloucestershire and Course Leader for the MA in Creative and Critical Writing. His areas of interest include the pedagogy of Creative Writing, new media and pedagogy and the creative process. His fifth collection of poetry is Chora: New & Selected Poems (Templar Poetry, 2009).
of expertise and interests. International representation was also important in order to encourage interest and contributions from North America, Australasia (key locations for the teaching of Creative Writing) as well as the UK.

The first call for papers went out in March 2008. The articles trickled in. After approximately six months, almost two dozen articles were received and circulated for peer review. As hoped for, the six articles selected included contributions from Australia and the UK, and they covered key pedagogical issues such as the emergence of the Creative Writing industry within the academy; whether Creative Writing can be taught; the strengths and failings of the workshop model; the place of theory in Creative Writing and the tensions and synergies between Creative Writing in the academy and the publishing industry. All the articles can be found in the first issue at www.cwteaching.com

As the journal developed I set about conceptualising the ‘satellite’ pages of book reviews and articles published elsewhere, and eventually purchased a stand-alone website to house everything rather than incorporate the journal into the English Subject Centre website. I felt it was crucial to have some form of product online as quickly as possible, as the journal would not really attract sufficient volume of contributions until it was ‘live’ and prospective contributors could see exactly what sort of articles were being published. My idea to include book reviews of the major texts that relate to the pedagogy of writing, links to other journals and organisations, which, collectively, may be of general use to postgraduate students or new lecturers involved searching online sources for articles and book reviews which had already been published. These sources included other online journals and pages from university websites, which held articles that could be viewed by the public. What struck me most as I reviewed what was available was just how little theoretically based discussion related to the pedagogy of Creative Writing was actually available online. In part, of course, that is related to the fact that the debates have only fairly recently emerged, but also because, no doubt, most of the articles are published by the print journals such as New Writing and Writing in Education.

Encouraged by this online gap in the market, I also set up a Facebook group, which was used to publicise the calls for papers and to create some wider interest in the resource among writers and teachers of writing elsewhere in the world. This group quickly garnered over 1,500 members, and that reassured me which means the journal can continue operation and the resource can expand. This funding is part of a wider initiative involving students on the postgraduate Teaching Creative Writing module who will use the current generation of the website to act as a starting point for a research project as part of their studies.

‘Have just checked out some of the papers and I’d like to say – thank you. What a brilliant and generous website and project.’ – Rosemary Dun, Creative Writing Teacher, UK

The students will generate articles as part of their assessment and submit them to conferences and other journals for publication. Part of the money will be used to make a contribution towards conference expenses of students taking the teaching module in 2009/2010. Two students who did the module in 2008/2009 had conference papers accepted at ‘Great Writing’, University of Bangor, while two others from the 2007/2008 cohort used the resource to refine previous assignment essays into conference papers and had those papers accepted to the postgraduate conference,
‘The Playful Paradox’, University of Bedfordshire. These articles will be added to the resource part of the site, on a page dedicated to student conference papers, where they will be available to be read by the following year’s module cohort as well as by students from other institutions. In future, students will also have the opportunity to work on the journal as interns and to continue to use the resource to get involved in pedagogical research and scholarship through the production of conference papers and book reviews.

‘This is an excellent resource. I wish I’d had it when I was teaching Creative Writing ... but looking at the website almost motivates me to get back into the fray.’ – Diane Wahto, Retired Lecturer in Creative Writing, USA

but, as the number of members grows, the potential is there to provide a focus for rich discussion. At the moment the volume of material makes browsing easy but, as it grows, the website will require reorganisation perhaps in relation to various ‘themes’ and it will need to be made fully searchable. I’d like to see some video and other media in use on the site too, perhaps taped interviews with experienced teachers, all aimed at expanding current debates in the pedagogy of Creative Writing and perhaps initiating new ones.

The Call for Papers for the third edition of the journal can be found on the website www.cwteaching.com where submission details are also located. The closing date for receipt of articles is 31 March 2010. Papers are welcome from anyone with a research interest in the pedagogy of Creative Writing who would like to get involved in this exciting and stimulating international debate.
Add a new ingredient to your teaching

T3 the Subject Centre’s popular database of teaching tips, has received a makeover. It is still a stimulating collection of pithy teaching ideas contributed by and for English and Creative Writing lecturers. And, despite the current economic situation, we are still able to give you a £10 book token for each idea (up to a maximum of £50).

In the updated version, however, you will find some handy new features:

- Searching by period, genre, pedagogical approach and author
- An improved display: fewer clicks needed to get to the tips!
- A much easier process for submitting ideas
- Printing tips is now much easier

T3 is at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/t3/index.php
Inquiry-based Learning in English: successful CILASS bids

We are delighted to announce that six project bids in our subject area have been successful in the recent funding competition held by the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences (CILASS) at the University of Sheffield (www.shef.ac.uk/cilass/). Inquiry (or Enquiry)-based Learning is a pedagogical approach which prioritises student-led inquiry and collaboration. Each of the successful bids will explore the potential of IBL in a different and exciting way.

More details about each project are available on our website at http://tinyurl.com/mgl8t8j

Inquiry-Based Learning Design and Literary Studies

Project leaders: Will Slocombe and Louise Marshall (Aberystwyth University)

This project will develop and disseminate a practicable methodology for IBL in English Studies. The project leaders will design a Level 2 option module requiring students to select primary texts, compile bibliographic materials, identify research questions and determine their own themes, topics and assessment activities. The project will also run a one-day conference to promote IBL pedagogy across humanities subjects.

Shakespeare and the Bridewell Archives

Project leader: Duncan Salkeld (University of Chichester)

This project will involve the design of a module in which students will study Shakespeare by means of independent research with the Elizabethan archives of the Bridewell Hospital www.bethlemheritage.org.uk/archive/web/image_viewer.htm?BCB-01,484 held at the Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum, Beckenham, Kent. Students will encounter a vast store of memorable historical cases and actively (in groups of four) link these cases to Shakespearian plays. Staff and student reports and research seminar/conference presentations will disseminate the project internally and externally.

Going Dutch: collaborative student research on language and culture

Project leader: Angela Goddard (York St John University)

Project partners: R Mesker, Dept of English, University of Amsterdam and C Bergstrom, Dept of English, University West, Sweden

This project will use new technology to facilitate student-led collaborative international research on language and culture. English language students at the University of Amsterdam and at York St John will work together online on contemporary questions in language, culture and communication, before coming together in York for a face-to-face conference where they will present papers to each other and to their staff.
Writing for Social Purpose: ideas for sustainable teaching and learning  
**Project leaders: Katy Shaw and Jess Moriarty (University of Brighton)**  
This project will offer students from different disciplines the chance to raise their social and historical consciousness and develop confidence in writing, research and presentation through collaborative IBL. Students will produce a piece of socially conscious creative work alongside an introspective piece of writing, demonstrating knowledge of a variety of socially conscious genres and forms and of socio-historical contexts. Staff will work with interdisciplinary agencies to create innovative materials and workshops drawing on their own research interests in the field as well as networking with guest professionals.

Dramatising Slavery & Emancipating Students: learning beyond the classroom  
**Project leader: Alan Rice (University of Central Lancashire)**  
Students will research historical characters involved in the transatlantic slave trade – including both perpetrators and victims – to provide materials for a dramatic tableau to be made freely available online as a pedagogical resource. The students will develop the material through field trips to museums and historical sites, meetings with local historians, archivists and curators. The completed tableau will be performed at a dissemination event.

Creative Writing Project Module  
**Project leader: Celia Brayfield (Brunel University)**  
This project will establish a template for IBL in Creative Writing by piloting an innovative MA module in partnership with the local community of writers. Students will be encouraged to find innovative ways to identify, engage and interact with their audience and will work in groups of 4–5 on projects related to creative writing to take place in west London.

Literary Communities of Inquiry  
Literary Communities of Inquiry is a proposed edited collection intended to bring together teachers and learners interested in exploring the possibilities of Inquiry-based Learning (IBL), particularly in literary studies and creative writing. Based on an event sponsored by CILASS, this collection will examine the ways in which IBL can be used in HE English to promote student learning and engagement, and seeks to cover both pedagogic theories and practical instances of IBL. Possible concepts to explore include undergraduate research, research-led learning, active learning, communities of practice and inquiry, problem-based learning and technology-enhanced learning, and the intersections between them. Please submit abstracts of 250–300 words (by 1 January 2010), with the subject header ‘Literary Communities CFP,’ to Will Slocombe (wws@aber.ac.uk) and Louise Marshall (lom@aber.ac.uk). Co-authored pieces (especially between teachers and students, whether current or past) are strongly encouraged.
The 4th Annual Higher Education Academy Student Essay Writing competition was a great success this year, and the topic we chose for our students proved provocative. We are happy to present Richard Patient’s essay, which was the best essay submitted by an English literature, Creative Writing or English language student. Richard won an iPod Touch. His essay is followed by those written by Patrick Gillett and Ashley Lister, the two runners-up.
can be sentenced due to a definition or a tone of voice. Or It is of practical use: think of the role semantics plays in the law: 'But that's not true and, more to the point, it misses the point. 'Yes, I see. Not of much practical use, is it? I mean, three years to looked pleased with himself. essentially androcentric nature of the English language.' He thought to see some confirmation of the suspicions I have held over the 'I also like the fact that you plumped for "he". It's interesting to me: "literaturist" isn't a word, you know.' 'I'm sorry, Cashew who?'

Richard Patient,
University of Southampton

'Why should the UK taxpayers support you for 3 years to read novels, write poems or play with words?' asked Josh, his triumphant enunciation a little premature, it must be said.

'Yes, he did. By "playing with words"; he made the speech marks in the air, 'we literaturists find out more about our language and that's what I love about English. You get to find out whether the human race has changed very much and, when you read Chaucer, or Pepys or Kazuo Ishiguro ...'.

'But it's not why something has to be "practical" anyway, because I am distrustful of what people mean by it. I think most people agree with the idea that there's more to life than eating and sleeping, so that can't be the meaning of it. Practical seems to mean earning as much money as possible. Is it just a vague, blanket term used to pooh-pooh anything creative? I don't want to be part of that sort of practicality. If "English" is a valid career path, which I am trying to prove it is, and I can make a living by it, then is it not really practical? After all, why do people try to earn lots of money? To make themselves happy. And I think literature, as well as other things, of course, can give you that.'

'So?'

'By making you think of more than just yourself; I don't see how anyone can be happy who isn't thinking about much more than themselves and happiness. The pursuit of truth for yourself and other people is a great thing. Just the pursuit itself. The best literature attempts to convey reality. People don't always get it right, or see things differently but even those differences highlight truth. I can enjoy Dickens' overblown monsters or the relentlessly minute inner workings of Joyce's prose. Dickens shows how we can't resist labelling people. Joyce, meanwhile, gets us to question how much we want to know about people, in life and fiction. Somehow, one gets us to question how much life reflects art, whilst the other convinces us that art doesn't, usually, reflect life.'

'Um, what?'

'I'm not sure. If I think I understand, then I probably don't. I love people, fictional people admittedly, and that's what I love about English. You get to find out whether the human race has changed very much and, when you read Chaucer, or Pepys or Kazuo Ishiguro ...'.

'So?'

'Yes, he did. By "playing with words"; he made the speech marks in the air, 'we literaturists find out more about our language and its effects on the ordinary person.'

'Grass.'

'Now tell me what you're thinking about without using any form of language.'

'What does that prove?'

'That we can't know anyone else without language. And I bet that when you thought of grass you thought the word grass. You can't even think straight without 'playing with words'. Saussure said so.

'Did ... he?'

'Yes, he did. By "playing with words",' he made the speech marks in the air, 'we literaturists find out more about our language and its effects on the ordinary person. No offence.'

'None taken.'

'I also like the fact that you plumped for "he". It's interesting to see some confirmation of the suspicions I have held over the essentially androcentric nature of the English language.' He looked pleased with himself.

'Yes, I see. Not of much practical use, is it? I mean, three years to work that out.'

'But that's not true and, more to the point, it misses the ... point. It is of practical use: think of the role semantics plays in the law: people can be sentenced due to a definition or a tone of voice. Or in economics and politics and the media where the connotations of a word can convey so much and can create such panic: bird flu, crusade; just mention the word "toxic" and watch the share prices tumble.'

'But I don't see why something has to be "practical" anyway, because I am distrustful of what people mean by it. I think most people agree with the idea that there's more to life than eating and sleeping, so that can't be the meaning of it. Practical seems to mean earning as much money as possible. Is it just a vague, blanket term used to pooh-pooh anything creative? I don't want to be part of that sort of practicality. If "English" is a valid career path, which I am trying to prove it is, and I can make a living by it, then is it not really practical? After all, why do people try to earn lots of money? To make themselves happy. And I think literature, as well as other things, of course, can give you that.'

'How?'

'By making you think of more than just yourself; I don't see how anyone can be happy who isn't thinking about much more than themselves and happiness. The pursuit of truth for yourself and other people is a great thing. Just the pursuit itself. The best literature attempts to convey reality. People don't always get it right, or see things differently but even those differences highlight truth. I can enjoy Dickens' overblown monsters or the relentlessly minute inner workings of Joyce's prose. Dickens shows how we can't resist labelling people. Joyce, meanwhile, gets us to question how much we want to know about people, in life and fiction. Somehow, one gets us to question how much life reflects art, whilst the other convinces us that art doesn't, usually, reflect life.'

'Um, what?'

'I'm not sure. If I think I understand, then I probably don't. I love people, fictional people admittedly, and that's what I love about English. You get to find out whether the human race has changed very much and, when you read Chaucer, or Pepys or Kazuo Ishiguro ...'.

'So?'

'Yes, he did. By "playing with words",' he made the speech marks in the air, 'we literaturists find out more about our language and its effects on the ordinary person.'

'Grass.'

'Now tell me what you’re thinking about without using any form of language.'

'What does that prove?'

'That we can’t know anyone else without language. And I bet that when you thought of grass you thought the word grass. You can’t even think straight without ‘playing with words’. Saussure said so.

‘Did ... he?’

‘Yes, he did. By “playing with words”’, he made the speech marks in the air, ‘we literaturists find out more about our language and its effects on the ordinary person. No offence.’

‘None taken.’

‘I also like the fact that you plumped for “he”. It’s interesting to see some confirmation of the suspicions I have held over the essentially androcentric nature of the English language.’ He looked pleased with himself.

‘Yes, I see. Not of much practical use, is it? I mean, three years to work that out.’

‘But that’s not true and, more to the point, it misses the ... point. It is of practical use: think of the role semantics plays in the law: people can be sentenced due to a definition or a tone of voice. Or in economics and politics and the media where the connotations of a word can convey so much and can create such panic: bird flu,
Why should UK taxpayers support you for 3 years to read novels, write poems or play with words?

**Patrick Gillett,**
**University of Cumbria,**
**Department of English**

As I approach the final few months of my three-year BA English degree with QTS Secondary Education it seems appropriate for me to place my fingers on my keyboard and take stock of my time at university.

The dates of my graduation ceremony in summer have been posted up on the university website; although I have several arduous assignments to complete before I can don a gown and cap, a teaching job awaits me at a well-renowned school in September. Friends will soon delight in being able to poke fun at my reinstated taxpayer status while moaning over my inflated holiday allowance. My previous career will eventually be forgotten in the need to write lesson plans and produce interesting and illuminating activities for the classroom. Perhaps, in a few years’ time, I might only remember my university years as a means to an end – a caesura (a pause) in the middle of a line of a stanza (verse) which addresses my life? A brief footnote in my memoirs? No.

These past three years have stretched and challenged my mind in exactly the way I wanted when I sent off my university application. Invited and asked to defend my opinion in seminars, I have developed confidence in my critical reasoning where there was previously little. Slowly – but eventually – I reconciled my ’9 to 5’ work mindset with the notion that a day and night’s research and reading for an essay was not a waste of time. In short, I embraced education ... and it has enveloped me.

As a mature student, it had been over 20 years ago since I had last felt the fear which comes when somebody whispers the word ‘exam’ in your presence. I had long been a passionate and informed reader but feared I would struggle to unravel a Renaissance sonnet. I might have inherited the gift of the gab from my mum but could I tell the difference between ‘anaphoric’ and ‘cataphoric’ in an English language seminar? Could I refrain from thinking of girls named Anna who own tabbies? Over time, these fears faded, as did my other old preconceptions on education. For example, learning environments can now be virtual – there is no need for chalk and dusters nowadays; and teachers, sorry, tutors, never ask you to copy out of a book. They impart knowledge and feelings instead, and give off an addictive air of appreciation, making a powerful contribution to the emotional and intellectual make-up of this soon-to-be newly qualified teacher.

Although I will soon be a graduate and will no longer need my library ID (showing the grinning face of a man who might have read Arthur Miller but who had no idea of Brecht or Ibsen’s work or what it is like to have actually written a play), I will always be a student ... of sorts. The ‘University of Life’ which my mother and father graduated from some years ago with honours will now have to be expanded to make room for the lifetime of study that I started three years ago and will now pass on in illuminated dribs and drabs. Perhaps, while they are clearing the ground for my foundation stone, they should clear a space for others? Maybe someone reading this essay ... perhaps someone wondering if they are cut out for the ‘student experience’?

Immediately after leaving my former career, and before entering university, I underwent a six-month stint as a volunteer English teacher in Ghana, West Africa. I saw at first hand the trials and tribulations of instructing children in life, literature and language, and I learned much about myself through the generosity of the Ghanaians I met and befriended. I felt ready to teach English. Returning to the UK, I was glad to be able to receive a student loan to pay my tuition fees – even better, there was a maintenance grant to go towards paying my rent. The three years since have flown by, and now I am ready to teach English. I am soon to join the workforce once again, and feel fortunate to do so at this tricky economic time. After being supported financially by others I am now in a position to support others in their dreams and ambitions. Such a commitment is not taken on lightly, but taxpayers were not consulted over the money which left their monthly pay packets to help me over the past three years. Perhaps they should have been polled for their opinion, I wonder. Would these folk put education – my education – before other, more pressing, needs?

In answer, I can only reply with this: the true worth of what I have studied these past three years will be apparent in my classroom and to all of my pupils. I will be able to relate to aspiring A-Level and university students, and can now confidently talk of the actual benefits of applying yourself to education. As an active, questioning reader, I can open young minds to the delights of Dylan Thomas or lasso in a bunch of rowdy Year 10 pupils restless with studying Of Mice and Men. Having learned the relevance of meter, rhythm and stanza, my forthcoming renditions of Blake, Hughes, Armitage and Duffy will not be as flat and uninspiring as the contents of my brain before entering university. If I had been denied the chance to debate and enter into dialogue, my chances of engaging Year 9 on a rainy last period on Friday afternoon would be slim to none. Without knowledge of the different types of ‘English’ narrative, I would not be the open-minded English teacher, whose words you read, who is about to commence his new career.

These lessons represent a tiny portion of a huge ‘mountain’ which I have climbed with the help of others. Other students that I encountered have been similarly inspired and empowered through their course. University, nay education, is a force for good. While all of it may not be for everyone – or, should I say, I’m still not convinced about a play by a certain Mancunian playwright – it has something for everyone ... and is everything for a certain someone ... ❄️
Why should UK taxpayers support you for 3 years to read novels, write poems or play with words?

Ashley Lister
Blackpool & Fylde College
Department of English, English Language, Literature and Writing

This question could have been written by my mother. It probably was. To hear her speak you’d think she was the only person in the UK paying taxes. ‘You already know how to read and write! What do you need a degree in it for? Why should my hard earned money get thrown away on you reading books?’

It’s hard to argue with mothers. They are invariably correct and, even when they’re not, it’s unlikely that they’re wrong.

I’ve spent three years studying English Language, Literature and Writing on a degree course. Reconsidering the original question: I’m one of those students who has spent three years reading novels, writing poems and playing with words – and all at the taxpayers’ expense. But I have to confess: I’ve only done one of those things.

I haven’t read a single novel while I’ve been on the course. The truth is, I had only read novels before I began my degree. Over the past three years, instead of reading novels, I have been understanding them. I have been critically analysing them, and I have been developing a greater awareness of the information being imparted. Since beginning this degree, I have to say that simply reading novels is now a thing of the past.

I should also add that I haven’t written poems during my degree. I’ve created poems. I’ve submitted an anthology of 5,000 words of verse for my final year writing portfolio. But I haven’t written poems: I’ve only ever rewritten poems.

All of which looks like nothing more than fancy word play – hedging from a truthful response to those first two issues behind paronomasia, semantics and pragmatics. And, if I have to confess to one guilty pleasure from the past three years it has to be that I love playing with words. It’s my personal ambition to play with words so I can one day prove that UK TAXPAYER is an anagram of MY MOTHER.

To take the liberty of rephrasing the question, I’d like to respond here to the suggestion that my mother (the sole UK taxpayer) is supporting me to do nothing of any material value. I’ll eschew the opportunity to argue Marxism and I’ll go onto tackle the erroneous idea that a degree in English is an investment into the potentially unprofitable.

Admittedly, there are only six novelists listed in The Sunday Times Rich List 2008: J K Rowling, Barbara Taylor Bradford, Jackie Collins, Lord Archer, Jack Higgins and Terry Pratchett. Between them their collective financial worth is listed at a little more than £1 billion. Newspaper owners Sir Ray Tindle, Freddie Johnston and family and Douglas Graham and family, have a collective worth of almost half that amount. There are a further 11 entries for independent publishing magnates with incomes ranging between £45 million and £400 million. Other sectors in this list (specifically those areas where a degree in English could potentially prove itself of worth) include film, media, books, television and advertising. Limitations of space and personal jealousy prevent me from itemising the overall totals from these sources. It’s sufficient to acknowledge that the holder of a degree in English has the potential to contribute to industry sectors that are worth billions and billions.

Financial worth aside (and making only the smallest mention of the fact that teaching and education are not sectors included on The Sunday Times Rich List), it’s generally accepted that a good number of students use an English degree as a step towards a teaching career. This is an opportunity for some of those students who have spent three years reading novels, writing poems and playing with words to impart their love of literature and literacy to a new generation.

Of course, some of these students will go on to teach ESOL, broadening the international understanding of English and helping to secure and develop the role of the language as the lingua franca of international academic and business communities. Others interested in teaching could use their qualification to assist with the UK’s growing number of successful adult literacy programmes. If reading is the gift that keeps on giving, then teaching the ability to read is potentially the greatest gift of all. A degree in reading novels, writing poems and playing with words puts a student in the ideal position to help give the gift to a growing number of learners.

It’s accepted that a degree in English allows a student to encounter some of the greatest minds that have ever committed their thoughts to posterity: Aristotle, Socrates, Freud, Marx, Althusser, Foucault, Saussure, de Beauvoire and Chomsky, to name a small sample. If the UK taxpayer were asked to invest in the genius of only one of those names, I’m sure that even my mother (that sole and most vocal of UK taxpayers) would not begrudge the expense. Not that any of those listed above were solely English graduates. Or, in fact, English.

My own degree in English has allowed me to visit and appreciate the haven that is Stratford-on-Avon and the Brontë’s parsonage at the heart of Haworth. Some (particularly those belligerent, maternal taxpayers) could argue that these places are little more than pretentious theme parks for the literati. However, there can be few UK taxpayers who would wish to abrogate these cultural heritage centres or refute their collective homage to the UK’s literary tradition. This is not to suggest that a degree in English guarantees the successful student automatic inclusion in the canon or a place in the annals of the UK’s literary history. But it has to be conceded that an in-depth understanding and appreciation of these landmarks benefits all of us who wish to respect these monuments to the language’s most creative genii.

Charles Darwin famously wrote, ‘The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind.’ Perhaps it’s my affection for playing with words but, when I forwarded this quote to my mother I told her, in this instance, Darwin was specifically talking about an English degree.
Professing and Pedagogy: Learning the Teaching of English
Shari J. Stenberg
(NCTE, 2005)

Professing and Pedagogy will be of interest to teachers interested in reflecting on their own practices, but Stenberg is concerned primarily with challenging ‘deeply entrenched conceptions of the research professor and the discipline’ (xvii). In this she certainly succeeds, and the book’s structure (following a preliminary chapter on teaching in a research environment, Stenberg’s chapters consider different aspects of the teaching experience: Teacher as Scholar, Teacher as Trainee, Teacher as Owner and Teacher as Learner) encourages serious reconsideration of teaching in a university environment. Stenberg’s discussion is informed by a rich pool of pedagogical theory, but the most interesting moments are those in which the author reflects on her own experiences as both student and teacher. She reflects on her teaching across time, providing journalistic material from her days as a student, supplemented with comments from her later life as a teacher. Stenberg’s approach does not break the distinction between teacher and learner, but does assert the ongoing development necessary for fruitful teaching environments.

Aimed primarily at a North American audience, its arguments may seem more fresh to a British reader. Self-reflection is not absent from British teaching practices, but exercises such as journal keeping among students, and the writing of letters from students to their new teacher, are far more common in American universities than they are here, and are much less common in disciplines outside Composition. A teacher or student unused to such practices may approach them with some hesitation. An American colleague commented, with regard to student journaling: ‘most students only fill it out because they have to’. This might be the case, but it is also true for assessed essays, whose value we almost never question. Stenberg’s analysis of teaching at university level espouses an ‘opening up’ of the teaching space. Her arguments suit the present moment very well, with interdisciplinarity becoming increasingly attractive to academic institutions as an engine for fresh ideas. She acknowledges that Composition specialists tend to be more focussed on pedagogy as a productive aspect of their discipline, compared with other disciplines which think of themselves as simply transferring knowledge through teaching; her focus on interdisciplinarity may interest many in disciplines beyond Composition.

Stenberg distinguishes between teacher training and teacher development: training produces a ‘finished product’ while development encourages ongoing self-assessment in a mutually open teaching environment. Her most convincing argument is that university teaching should be a process of development, and it is one which speaks as much to the teaching of English in the UK as in North America. The more personal material is both informative and entertaining, and will perhaps prove the most useful aspect of the book for a teacher engaged in their own self-development.

Shane Collins
Durham University
Tragedy: A Student Handbook  
Sean McEvoy with Tony Coult and Chris Sandford  
(English and Media Centre, 2009)

One of the most memorable literature lectures I attended began where a group discussion was instigated by the following quote:

‘Tragedy: when the feeling’s gone and you can’t go on it’s tragedy …’.

Needless to say, this prompted some areas of heated debate and discussion. We eschewed referencing Shakespeare’s big four, and concepts of hamartia, hubris and anagnorisis, in favour of arguing whether it was proof of the injustice of a godless universe that Steps had been allowed to cover the Bee Gees’ classic hit.

Tragedies in performance always have, and always will, remain an enigma. On the one hand Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Othello and King Lear continue to enjoy perennial popularity through various interpretations and incarnations on stage and screen. On the other hand: who really wants to endure something as miserable as a tragedy?

Sean McEvoy, with Tony Coult and Chris Sandford, strive to address this dichotomy with the newly released title, Tragedy: A Student Handbook. As the authors observe in the introduction,

One of the paradoxical characteristics of tragic drama – and a defining difference between the literary and everyday concept of tragedy – is that at the same time as feeling sorrow and pity for those whose suffering we see on stage, we also take pleasure in the representation of suffering. (12-13)

To some, this might look like a justification for the literary version of schadenfreude. However, as a working definition for an erstwhile indefinable genre, this presents a tenable way of looking at tragedy.

Tragedy, particularly as it is portrayed in theatre, is an abstruse concept. The distinctive and characteristic elements of the genre – from classical Greek through to Edward Bond’s Bingo – are a phenomenon more readily identified than understood or explained. Is Hamlet a tragedy because the eponymous hero is unlucky enough to be caught in his stepfather’s villainous machinations? Or is it a tragedy because the play ends with more senseless deaths than soap operas at Christmas? How can the same genre label be applied to compositions as diverse as Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex and Beckett’s Waiting for Godot?

One of the most illuminating ways of prompting valid responses to these questions is through the process of a thorough and comprehensive comparison with examples from the genre. To that end, Tragedy: A Student Handbook, contains an overview of a broad range of tragedies from the time of Aeschylus through to the contemporary writings of Bond. The book provides insights into the opposites of major playwrights from within the genre, as well as comprehensive notes and criticism pertinent to individual works.

Admittedly, the content here isn’t the line-by-line autopsy familiar to readers of individual title analyses (of the ‘York Notes/Spark Notes’ variety), but this book is aiming to present readers with an insight into a major literary concept rather than an ‘Idiot’s Guide’ to a single work or cheat sheets for a specific playwright.

Key concepts are explained and explored in a clear and accessible language. The book includes a glossary of specific terminology as well as a timeline that relates the appearance of various authors and their literary tragedies to those important political, social and cultural events that potentially shaped each work’s inception, production and success. In a climate where the current trends in literary criticism tend to favour cultural historicism, the provision of such detail certainly seems like an ideal springboard for renewed interpretations and reconsiderations of established works. As the overview and discussion of each examined work is also presented against critical opinions from a range of disciplines – from Freudian to Feminism and Nietzsche to New Criticism – the potential for further reading on this absorbing subject is limited only by the reader’s tenacity for tragedy.

Tragedy: A Student Handbook is a compact volume providing an invaluable insight for any literature student needing a comprehensive understanding of tragedy as a genre or requiring an accessible introduction to specific material and comparative titles. Aimed at A-Level students and undergraduates, this text should be core reading for any student on a course that broaches dramatic tragedy as a genre and advised reading for any learner requiring additional material for their studies on a specific tragedy. Not only will this title give learners a grasp of this enormously enjoyable subject, but it should also help to provide a scaffold of understanding that can be applied to each student’s criticism and interpretation of works that fall under the umbrella of tragedy.

Ashley Lister  
Blackpool & the Fylde College
**Studying English Literature: A Practical Guide**

Tory Young

(Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Tory’s very useful *Studying English Literature: A Practical Guide* could just as easily have been entitled ‘Teaching English Literature: A Practical Guide’. Described on its cover as an ‘essential guide’ which ‘provides the answers every first-year English student want to know about how to approach the subject’, it delivers much more than its slim 150-page format suggests it might, and could be used in a variety of ways: independently by students wishing to gain an overview of the subject they are embarking on in higher education; as a means of reinforcing key ideas and skills in undergraduate teaching; crucially, as a tool for reminding those of us engaged in introducing and developing these ideas and skills that we need regularly to re-evaluate and revise our own thinking and practices within teaching and assessment of English literature.

Young’s book is clearly structured into six sections, and the very straightforward headings: Introduction; Reading; Argument; Essays; Sentences; References, belie the complexity and intellectual depth of each chapter. This approach and the short subheaded sections in each chapter, punctuated with boxed direct questions and information, will help any reader to navigate their way through what is a vast and dynamic subject. Footnotes and endnotes are not used, but each chapter is concluded with a list of works cited and the text is clearly indexed, which makes its range of references easy to follow and therefore to use. Where this book differs from other texts aimed at this group of students, such as Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle’s *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (3rd ed, 2004), Peter Barry’s *Beginning Theory* (2nd ed, 1999) and Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), all of which are mentioned, is in its concentration on the related activities of reading and the writing which is one of the products of this reading. In my own teaching of first-year students, I make use of all these texts, plus Jonathan Culler’s *A Very Short Introduction to Literary Theory* (1997) and Robert Eaglestone’s *Doing English* (2000), within modules covering an Introduction to Literary Studies and English Literature: History, Diversity and Change. While Eagleton’s Literary Theory has become, ironically, almost a ‘canonical text in its own right’, as Young notes, and Bennett and Royle’s eclectic and interesting book can be difficult for a new student with its range of references and thematic approach to the subject, Young’s book succinctly draws together the key elements of these well-used texts without over simplifying or obscuring areas of fruitful complexity. Here, then, we find an overview of the historical development of our subject, a discussion of literacy and imaginative writing in contemporary society alongside advice on how and what to read, how to prepare for written responses to set questions about texts and directions towards useful reference texts and online resources.

The direction the text will take is neatly illustrated in its opening section:

This is a book for literature students. It seeks to answer some basic questions about the role of literature in society, the nature of literature as an academic subject, and the relationship between reading within and outside the university. It intends to provoke you into reconsidering the role of literature in your life, the ways in which you read stories, and the ways in which they have shaped you. Above all, through examination of these issues, it seeks to inspire your writing and your reading.

While Young’s guess that the choice of literature as a subject of study is based on a ‘passion for reading’ provoked a snort of cynical laughter in this teacher, there is no doubt that all students can engage with the process outlined and encouraged above. Young reminds us that there are ways of developing critical thinking skills in students which involve them in an active and questioning engagement with reading which can then be translated/transformed into more successful writing. The use of a logbook to write informally, especially about early encounters with texts, and the ‘folded paper’ exercise discussed in the chapter on ‘Argument’ are useful ways of beginning a dialogue with the text and oneself. Descriptions of these kinds of activities are both reassuring on a personal level, in that I am trying to do very similar things with the students I see, but also remind me that students, in my experience, fail to take seriously any activity which is not formally assessed. Young raises important questions about the nature of assessment and the continued – changing? – emphasis on the assessed individual essay and it is right and proper that we should reflect on the value we place on certain forms of assessment practices in broader terms.

A recent English Subject Centre Conference at Northumbria University, ‘Beyond the Essay’ addressed this issue, and Rob Pope, who endorses Young’s book, spoke illuminatingly about the need to collapse the rigid and prescriptive boundaries between so-called ‘creative’ writing and conventional critical writing, boundaries which he sees as contrary to the material nature of the subject we are engaged with. Young suggests some practical ways that this may be achieved and established as a way of responding to literature from an early point in students’ studies.

Interestingly, Young’s own stylistic approach here is in a report-style format: bullet points, boxes, numbered subsections – all features that are discouraged in conventional university essays. I found myself interrogating this style, as I’m sure Young intended and expected. This did not detract from the impact of the text, although its cover – primary colours, images of stacks of books and pen and paper – suggests a kind of smart irony that may deter a less experienced reader: it looks pretty dull.

It is evident that Young is as much concerned with pedagogical issues as with the content and knowledge base of the modules we are designing and bringing to students. She reminds us that we are all students, continually learning and updating our knowledge, our skills and our approaches to reading. In encouraging students to be more creative in their criticism and their approaches to study, we should remember to apply this edict to our own practices too; Young’s fine and lucid book will be a source of support for student and teacher alike.

Suzanne Brierley

University Centre at Blackburn College and The Open University
Bill Lawson (University of Memphis) kicked the session off with his paper, ‘Teaching Social and Political Philosophy and Transatlantic literary discourse’. He highlighted the way that new developments in British academia around employability and research-informed teaching means there are sometimes resources for students to do live project work in the field of Transnational Black Studies. He discussed innovative pedagogic techniques such as dummy curating (students in teams curating an exhibition in a time-limited experiment) and demonstrated his dramatic tableau of the slave trade that foregrounds inquiry-based learning. He outlined the way his commemorating Abolition module enables him to lead field studies to museums and archives for students who then produce projects which use primary documents. His students helped at the conference and displayed their final posters, which included new materials on Henry Box Brown, an abolitionist activist, that were not familiar to any of the experts present.

Alan Rice rounded off the session with approaches to ‘Commemorating Abolition in the Classroom through Drama and Dummy Curating’. Rice highlighted the way that new developments in British academia around employability and research-informed teaching means there are sometimes resources for students to do live project work in the field of Transnational Black Studies. He discussed innovative pedagogic techniques such as dummy curating (students in teams curating an exhibition in a time-limited experiment) and demonstrated his dramatic tableau of the slave trade that foregrounds inquiry-based learning. He outlined the way his commemorating Abolition module enables him to lead field studies to museums and archives for students who then produce projects which use primary documents. His students helped at the conference and displayed their final posters, which included new materials on Henry Box Brown, an abolitionist activist, that were not familiar to any of the experts present.

Alan Rice
University of Central Lancashire

Gary Cape
The University of Stirling

For our Student Live Project we were given the task of researching ex-slave abolitionists who came to Britain between 1840 and 1860, focusing on the North West of England. We decided to focus our research on Henry “Box” Brown in the hope of finding some new evidence of his opponents’ Exhibits. This is an Entertainment Bill that was found in the Eyton collection, which is part of the Shropshire Archives. This is evidence of Brown’s visit to Shrewsbury between the 10th & 17th December 1859 which at the time has not been documented before now.

There is also an advertisement for this in the Shrewsbury Chronicle which states: “PANORAMA OF THE SLAVE STATES—Our Music Hall will be opened next week with the celebrated panorama of Africa and America with illustrations of Negro life, by Mr. Box Brown, who was born a slave, and as it appears, was packed in a box as luggage and conveyed 350 miles to escape slavery. This panorama has lately been exhibited at Bridgnorth, Brough, Wrexham... before the clergy and leading gentry, who spoke very highly of the entertainment.”

Census
In the 1861 census, Henry Brown is shown to be living in North Street, Keighley, Yorkshire as a “lecturer on America etc.”, he lived there with his wife Jane Brown, 26 and their daughter Ages, 7 months who is registered as born in Stockport, her full name being Agnes Jane Floyd Brown. There is however no record of Brown’s marriage to Jane in this country. In 1864 they had a son named Edward Henry, who was registered in the city of Bristol. On his son’s birth certificate Brown is noted as being a “Lecturer in Mesmerism”. In the next census of 1871 they are registered as living in Gresham, Manchester where they also have a servant. It is also while in Manchester that they have another daughter named Annie. The evidence shown through the census’ and the birth registers shows that Brown along with his family moved around regularly during his time in Britain.

Links with Wolverhampton
As part of the research we searched around all the archives in the Northwest. The archives in Manchester replied saying they had a letter in their collection from a Henry Brown. However on viewing the letter there is no proof that this is the same Henry Brown. What is interesting about this is that it was for the Box. C.P. Villiers, who was the MP for Wolverhampton and to this date the longest serving MP for this country, lasting 60 years. He was also a member of the Society for the Extinction of the slave trade, which he is registered in his 1830 prospectus. He was also complexed about the problems in America, there is a speech he goes on American Affairs which was documented in the.
Gweno Williams, who is registered in our Directory of Experience and Interests, shares her favourite books with WordPlay. Sign up today, at tinyurl.com/dayyrm, and your desert island texts could be featured too.

I must admit that the idea of a desert island is an anxious one. To move from a reading life full of rich variety and new writing, to a fixed number of known texts would feel like considerable privation. Consequently, my choices, among drama, women’s writing, science fiction and poetry, are as expansive as I hope this WordPlay island will allow.

My list celebrates the capacity of early drama to be constantly new, different and thought-provoking. Working in York, I have greatly enjoyed involvement as performer, producer, audience member with several productions of the panoramic York Mystery Plays, stretching from Creation to the Last Judgement. I would take the Complete Works of Shakespeare, complemented by Renaissance Drama (2005) ed Arthur F. Kinney, which includes favourite plays by Kyd, Webster, Ford, Jonson (though alas no Revenger’s Tragedy).

Folio editions (widely circulated by the author to major libraries of her day) of Playes (1662) and Plays never before Published (1668) by Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623-73) would be essential. There is still much exciting work to be done on Cavendish’s 19+ plays, which, like all her works in numerous genres, she wrote for ‘Future Ages’.

To feed my imagination and remember the possibility of multiple futures, I would take complete series of Dr Who (1964-) and Star Trek (1966-).

Ursula K. LeGuin’s science fiction novel The Telling (2001) is included for its remarkable destabilising treatment of the reliability of narrative, and its searching insights into the complexities of cultural difference.

As a reminder of Britain’s multiple languages and many rich literary traditions, I would include texts from yr hen iath (trans: the old tongue), Welsh. Since my parents named me after a poem by Welsh Second World War poet Alun Lewis (1915-1944), this should be poetry. From many possible options I choose the Oxford Book of Welsh Verse in English (1977) ed. Gwyn Jones.

One of the greatest privileges of my English teaching career has been the opportunity to meet and work closely with many authors. Outstanding works by writers I have known include the thought-provoking post-apocalyptic eco-novel Into the Forest (1996) by Californian writer Jean Hegland, my colleague, friend and office-neighbour during a Fulbright year in the USA. I am equally inspired by the authoritative mythic feminist poem ‘I Was That Woman’ (1989) by Debjani Chatterjee MBE, YSJU’s most recent RLF Fellow and a passionate advocate for literature.
The energy and enthusiasm in both workshops and the quality of the papers throughout the conference left no doubt that the continuing importance of the subject area for teachers and students alike. The workshop underlined the impact of Women's Studies on the women (and men) who have experienced it and proved the value of Women's Studies and highlighted the interrelationship between women's employment, the institutionalisation of equal opportunities and Women's Studies training. In the context of the decline and closure of Women's Studies Centres throughout the UK, moving from pedagogy to employment, the workshop provided advice for those scholars seeking a career in Women's Writing has come from and where it might go in the future. Considering the developments in teaching practice, pedagogy and approaches to teaching women's literature over the past 40 years, the workshop was extremely valuable for early career academics. In Gabriele Griffin's workshop, participants delved into the current state of Women's Studies in the UK. Moving from pedagogy to employment, the workshop provided advice for those scholars seeking a career in Women's Studies and highlighted the interrelationship between women's employment, the institutionalisation of equal opportunities and Women's Studies training. In the context of the decline and closure of Women's Studies Centres throughout the UK, the workshop underlined the impact of Women's Studies on the women (and men) who have experienced it and proved the continuing importance of the subject area for teachers and students alike.

The energy and enthusiasm in both workshops and the quality of the papers throughout the conference left no doubt that feminism remains a vibrant force that continues to shape research and teaching across the globe.

Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon,
Edge Hill University

In terms of policy, Peter Barry highlighted how the RAE and AHRC cultures pull PhD research in different directions: the RAE towards mono-disciplinarity and the monograph and the AHRC towards interdisciplinarity, knowledge transfer and wider impact. Is the ‘traditional’ PhD a good preparation for the new collaborative, interdisciplinary world where research has to demonstrate its relevance to the wider community? The Creative Writing PhD mirrors this ‘dilemma’ in the differing weights assigned to creative and reflective elements in different institutions.

A panel comprising Farah Karim-Cooper, Bridget Escombe, Gordon McMullan and Christie Carson shared the experience of the Collaborative Doctoral award run by Shakespeare’s Globe in conjunction with King’s College London and with Queen Mary University of London. While there are notable benefits and opportunities for students in being active participants in a lively theatre culture, panel members recognised the lure of students being distracted from the primary purpose of their doctorate. While the Collaborative Award was hailed a success in terms of manipulating the knowledge transfer agenda for disciplinary ends, it was acknowledged that there were constraints imposed on students having to work within the boundaries of a pre-determined project.

In the afternoon, discussion centred on personal experiences of the PhD, both for those who were in mid-career and able to reflect back on how it had shaped their futures and for those still going through the ‘long, dark night of the soul’, as one participant put it. What emerged was the diversity of the ‘PhD experience’, which includes that of mature students who may not be aiming for an academic career and international students who may be worrying about how they will match up against their compatriots when they seek a job ‘back home’. The importance of the supervisor/supervisee relationship was a continuing thread through these discussions, as was the nature and purpose of the thesis itself.

Like a good thesis, the day was driven forward by curiosity, but left plenty of scope for further discussion.

Jane Gawthrope, English Subject Centre
Amid the wilderness of jargon deployed in higher education circles today, ‘future-proof’ takes my personal biscuit. If you’ve yet to make its acquaintance, the phrase most commonly refers to the skills and qualities our graduates are thought to need to survive in a world where there are no safe careers, where IT is constantly evolving, where we are all players in the global knowledge economy (there goes a second biscuit). But it doesn’t stop with students: some departments and universities are now believed to be in need of future-proofing.

There are sound reasons why. Most of us admit to anxiety about our students’ employment prospects, about our institutions’ long-term health (especially when the sole Conservative Party contribution to the HE debate is a policy document called Sink or Swim?), and, since the future of the great globe itself is also at stake, about our place on a warming planet; most of us want to do something to help. But ‘future-proofing’? It reeks of retrenchment, of panic; it breathes the fear we associate with unimaginative parents or some manual for survivors of nuclear devastation. Ostensibly a signal that we prepare our students for an uncertain working life, the phrase asks them to assume that their futures will be hostile and crisis-ridden. Imagine Kipling’s ‘If’ recast for the ‘future-proof’ generation: ‘If you can multitask while all about you …’ What’s wrong with giving them a more fundamental, nourishing sense of the hope that comes of curiosity?

Such thoughts came to mind as I was listening to Ronald Barnett at this year’s Higher Education Academy conference in Manchester – in fact most of my title is borrowed from his. A wide-ranging thinker about universities who dwells on pasts and futures with a freedom we could wish on all vice chancellors, Barnett emphasised the Heideggerian ‘being’ that underpins it – the ‘metaphysical’ university might well resign itself to resting in peace beneath the feet of entrepreneurs and bureaucrats. ‘Have hope’, was the essence of Barnett’s reply. ‘Give me some future-proofing,’ I mused.

Studies of morale indicate that it fades the further your working thoughts stray from your immediate circle, so it’s hardly surprising that the hopes we treasure for our students can dim to extinction at the sight of the next set of Senate papers. But, in an important sense that no amount of phoney mission statements can diminish, those we teach are our institutions. Our best chance of shaping the future of our universities is to fill our students with a sense of possible futures that draw on real pasts: of the multiple layering of metaphysics, research, therapy and enterprise that continues to characterise the part of institutional life called English Studies. In the adaptability of our subject and its students there is, after all, hope.

In Barnett’s view, such dynamism gives grounds for hope: it means our future is in our hands and we should fashion it to create a new kind of ‘metaphysical’ university. Leaving aside the suspicion that such futurism seems a little nostalgic, why (I asked) should we be optimistic? Universities may be able to exercise a measure of control over their futures, but that may only mean having the freedom to make bad decisions that help to create bad futures. Precisely because of the losses Barnett identified – academic community, the use of space that underpins it – the ‘metaphysical’ university might well resign itself to resting in peace beneath the feet of entrepreneurs and bureaucrats. ‘Have hope’, was the essence of Barnett’s reply. ‘Give me some future-proofing,’ I mused.

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Asked to envisage English Studies in the universities of the future, some academics might tell a grumpy, lapsarian tale of students doomed to read, listen, punctuate, browse and attend less but Google, Twitter, plagiarise, pay and complain more (for such dystopian visions, read Frank Furedi’s column in the Times Higher). Maybe, but there are other futures, ones that, right now, are digging deep into the past with new and exciting tools: modules on book history that ask undergraduates to do their own research in EEBO; students creating multi-media commentaries on canonical poems; linguistics projects that use the latest software to track neologisms. These, and many more examples, show us how the future we are already busy inventing with our students has begun to enrich not only our understanding of our core business, the written text, but of the way texts and readers might interact in decades to come. If that’s the future, I for one would rather not be proofed against it.
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For more details or to register, please visit our homepage or contact the English Subject Centre at esc@rhul.ac.uk
The English Subject Centre supports all aspects of the teaching and learning of English Literature, English Language and Creative Writing in higher education in the UK. It is a Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy

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