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Creating a website that promotes essay-writing skills
Gavin Budge
This newsletter is published by the English Subject Centre, part of the Subject Network of the Higher Education Academy (previously the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN)). The Subject Centre provides many different kinds of help to English lecturers – more details are available in this newsletter and on our website (http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/). At the heart of all our work is the view that the HE teaching of English is best supported from within the discipline itself.

As well as updates on the Centre’s activities and on important developments (both within the discipline and across HE), you will find articles here on a wide range of English-related topics. The next issue of the newsletter will appear in Autumn 2006. If you would like to submit an article (of between 300 and 3,000 words), propose a book or software review (perhaps a textbook review by one of your students) or respond in a letter to someone else’s article, please contact the editor of the Autumn issue, Nicole King (nicole.king@rhul.ac.uk).

In the meantime, you can keep in touch with our activities by subscribing to our email list at http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/english-heacademy.html. The newsletter is distributed to English departments throughout the UK and is available online at http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/index.php along with previous issues. If you would like extra copies, please email us at esc@rhul.ac.uk.
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The Higher Education Academy is currently considering proposals for Subject Centres to commission ‘subject enquiries’ — systematic, policy-oriented, enquiries designed to map trends and extrapolate them into predictions about the future health of the subject. Whether or not such an enquiry into the English subject groups would be appropriate, the English Subject Centre would argue that all our ongoing work constitutes in a sense such a longitudinal study of what is happening. This Newsletter and its ingredients constitute an example. So do the website, or the dozen or more departmental projects flourishing at any one moment. So, too, do the reports which we have recently commissioned into A-level under Curriculum 2000 and into the teaching of Shakespeare, and those we are about to commission into the taught MA and (joint with the subject centre for Languages and Linguistics) into student transition from A-level English Language into HE Language and Linguistics.

And that is without mentioning the Palgrave/English Subject Centre ‘Teaching the New English’ series of which the first three volumes have just been published (see advertisement on p. 5). The Subject Centre has been from the beginning in the business of identifying, collecting and communicating knowledge about the dynamics of the subject, and doing so in ways that we hope and believe are practically useful to our colleagues across the community.

To assert this is to do more than engage in corporate self-advertisement. It is to recur to the question raised in my last Foreword about what kinds of knowledge Subject Centres represent and foster. Let me take this back to the perennial problem of creating an idiom for dialogue about teaching and learning. Within months we shall be coming to the end of a period when strategies and tactics surrounding the RAE have tended to dominate attention in many universities. It is hardly a wild guess to suppose that those very universities (highly aware of TQI and the Student Satisfaction Survey, fees, or the dangers of even unmerited adverse publicity) are going to invest a good deal more attention in learning and teaching. Within months we shall be coming to the end of a period when strategies and tactics surrounding the RAE have tended to dominate attention in many universities. It is hardly a wild guess to suppose that those very universities (highly aware of TQI and the Student Satisfaction Survey, fees, or the dangers of even unmerited adverse publicity) are going to invest a good deal more attention in learning and teaching. Within months we shall be coming to the end of a period when strategies and tactics surrounding the RAE have tended to dominate attention in many universities. It is hardly a wild guess to suppose that those very universities (highly aware of TQI and the Student Satisfaction Survey, fees, or the dangers of even unmerited adverse publicity) are going to invest a good deal more attention in learning and teaching.

How will writing programmes impact, how do they already impact upon more traditional areas of the subject? What epistemological authority do such programmes carry? What lessons for teaching and assessment may be learned by other areas of the discipline? What kind of disciplinary hybrids may grow up? What are the implications for scholarship or for how students work? What new models emerge for relations between teachers and taught? A number of English Subject Centre publications and projects have already partially addressed these issues.

The reconfiguring of English Studies in relation to these and related developments will be the subject of Renewals, our 2007 conference (http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/renewals/). We must ask, says Paul Dawson in his thought-provoking new book Creative Writing and the New...
All Change at the Subject Centre

Andrew Maunder has now left his part-time post as Academic Co-ordinator at the Subject Centre to return full-time to his post at the University of Hertfordshire. Many thanks to Andrew for his invaluable work.

We are delighted to welcome Nicole King to the Subject Centre, as a full-time Academic Co-ordinator. Nicole's most recent post was at the University of California San Diego and she will be working for us on a range of exciting new projects, events and publications. Nicole's research topics include black/postcolonial diaspora identities, C.L.R. James, creolisation, and Caribbean and American literary genres. Her current book project, *Blackness and Its Others: Discourses of Authenticity in Black Literature*, considers twentieth-century black writing that deliberately situates itself or is otherwise situated outside the concepts and boundaries of so-called 'normative' blackness.

Christie Carson, an old friend, has rejoined the Subject Centre to work as part-time CETL (Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) Liaison Officer. Christie has been charged with developing the Subject Centre's relationship with four CETLs that address ways in which students can engage with creative practice: ArtsWork Learning Labs at Bath Spa; the Capital Centre at Warwick (see p. 37); C4C Collaborating for Creativity at York St John; and the Centre for Employability through the Humanities at Central Lancashire. For more details on CETLS, see http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/cetl/index.php.

*Humanities* (Routledge, 2005) ‘what constitutes knowledge in Creative Writing, and how does work produced by teachers and students in Creative Writing (i.e. their ‘research’) contribute to knowledge in Literary Studies ...’

The fraught questions of creativity and originality have currency in whatever it is we mean by student research as well as in writing labelled ‘creative’. Enabling students as producers is the subject of all manner of employability initiatives as well as of the work of our colleagues in Centres for Excellence in creative arts. But the Subject Centre takes the view that something very much more is going on here than universities somehow pandering to student demand or caving in to DfES policy. We believe that the potential for mutations and hybridisation across the already permeable boundaries between the study of writing, literature and language are of gathering significance for the future of the subject. This we think is true at the level of the process of the workshop or seminar as it is for supplementation of the traditional analytical essay.

The meaning and nature of this silent revolution go beyond tools and pragmatic local decisions. While we must acknowledge major differences between the reception of Creative Writing in British universities and its much earlier acclimatisation in the USA, we may be about to observe an intellectual impact on UK English Studies comparable – though with different outcomes – to the arrival of Cultural Studies and ‘Theory’ a generation ago. Where that intellectual upheaval had surprisingly little impact on teaching and assessment, it seems unlikely that writing, with its emphasis on students as makers and performers, will leave our pedagogies untouched.
Brief details of each of the English Subject Centre’s forthcoming events are given below. If you would like to attend any of these events please register on our website at [http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explorer/events](http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explorer/events) or email esc@rhul.ac.uk. All events, with the exception of the New Lecturers’ conference, are free of charge.

**Networking Day for Humanities Careers Advisers**  
16 June 2006: Goodenough College, Central London

The English Subject Centre, in collaboration with other humanities Subject Centres and their AGCAS ‘buddies’ at Liverpool and UEA, is convening a meeting for HE career advisers with an interest in the humanities. The meeting will provide a forum for careers advisers to discuss any issues of common concern and to share experiences. Dr Geoff Hinchcliffe, Skills Development Adviser at UEA, will be giving a presentation on ‘Capability’ and Diane Appleton of Liverpool University and others will be describing their English Subject Centre funded projects to enhance services to English students. Other topics for discussion might include embedding careers management skills in humanities degrees and the use of work placements, but we will enable delegates to shape the agenda according to their own priorities.

**Teaching Shakespeare: ‘Devise, Wit, Write, Pen’**  

A two-day event hosted by the Shakespeare Institute and sponsored by the English Subject Centre with the CAPITAL Centre of Warwick University and the British Shakespeare Association. The first day will map out the current teaching landscape and will announce the results of a survey of HE Shakespeare teaching that has been conducted by Dr Neil Thew for the Subject Centre. In order to contextualise the results of the survey, the day will begin with reflective statements on teaching practice by representatives of each of the sponsoring organisations. Participants will then be given an opportunity to respond. The results of the survey will be presented at the culmination of the first day and participants will be given the opportunity to discuss its outcomes over a glass of wine. The second day will focus on the work of the CAPITAL Centre, a Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning which combines the strengths of the University of Warwick and the Royal Shakespeare Company (see p. 37 below). Professor Jonathan Bate will be on hand to introduce the work of the CAPITAL Centre and members of the Centre will lead participants in a workshop. After lunch a discussion about the future of teaching Shakespeare will end the event.

**Teaching Playwriting**  
14 October 2006: Royal Holloway University of London, Bedford Square

This event is an opportunity to meet and discuss strategies for teaching playwriting, to share best practice in course design and assessment, and to discuss the value and purpose of teaching playwriting in Higher Education. It will be an opportunity to compare experiences and develop an informal network of playwriting teachers. The event aims to share experiences, information, and ideas for teaching playwriting, further the debate about the nature of teaching creative writing for performance in HE, articulate the value of playwriting within the academy and develop an informal network of playwriting teachers.

**Teaching Religion in Early Modern Studies**  
10 November 2006: University of Manchester

This event, a collaboration between three Subject Centres (English; History, Classics and Archaeology; Philosophy and Religious Studies) will explore interdisciplinary perspectives in the teaching of early modern religion. Charting the spectrum of student commitments, the workshop will feature discussion on such topics as ‘Secularism, fundamentalism and the teaching of early modern religion’, ‘Teaching the reformation’, ‘Teaching religious literature’, ‘Teaching theology and religious ideas’ and ‘Teaching religious institutions and communities’. Participants will include Michael Brown, Brian Cummins, Alan Ford, Jeremy Gregory, Crawford Gribben, Graeme Murdock, Gerald Hammond, Sandra Hynes, Peter Marshall, Joad Raymond and Lucy Wooding.

**Training Conference for New Lecturers in English**  
1-2 December 2006: University of Birmingham

The aims of this conference are to share and debate practical teaching ideas and activities as they relate to English as a subject, to equip new lecturers with a ‘survival kit’ of ideas and to establish a mutual support network. The conference will combine short contextual and orientation talks by leading members of the profession with practical work in groups, each facilitated by a member of the Subject Centre staff. The event is intended for lecturers in the English disciplines (Literature, Language, Creative writing) who are in their first or second year of full-time teaching. It supplements local PgCHE courses which are inevitably of a generic nature by offering the opportunity to reflect on the demands of subject teaching. Cost £45 (includes accommodation and meals).
Teaching the New English

'The Teaching the New English Series is a welcome and timely contribution to the changing canon, curriculum, and classroom practice of English in higher education. Imaginatively conceived and professionally edited, the series will be required reading for instructors in English studies worldwide.'

Professor Elaine Showalter, Professor Emerita of English, Princeton University, USA, and author of Teaching Literature

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Approaches to New Media
Edited by Michael Hanrath and Deborah L. Madson

This innovative new series is concerned with the teaching of the English degree in universities in the UK and elsewhere. The series addresses new and developing areas of the curriculum as well as more traditional areas that are reforming in new contexts. Although the series is grounded in intellectual and theoretical concepts of the curriculum, it is concerned with the practicalities of classroom teaching. The volumes will be invaluable for new and more experienced teachers alike.

Published in association with the English Subject Centre. Director: Ben Knights

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The first 3 titles in the Teaching the New English series are available at the special discounted price of £12.99 each & postage and packing (RRP £16.99).

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FORTHCOMING IN 2007:
Teaching Chaucer in the Classroom  Gall Ashton & Louise Sylvester (Eds)
Teaching African-American Women’s Writing  Gina Wisker (Ed)
Teaching Creative Writing  Heather Beck (Ed)
The usual narrative of the development of English as a discipline is big on grand designs. In the 1860s Matthew Arnold thought that the appreciation of literature should supplant religion in providing spiritual nourishment in industrial life. F.R. Leavis, from the 1930s, continued this argument. He claimed that utilitarian values had so throttled the life force of twentieth-century culture, that it was only in reading really great literature that our moral and spiritual bearings could be recovered. More recently, the more politicised side of ‘literary theory’ (though in itself a beast with many shapes) proposed cultural criticism as a way of resisting ideological incorporation into the same social norms.

All of these views have had their impact across the education system. Arnold was an inspector of schools. Many Leavisites took their crusade from the varsity to the secondary school, where they worked as influential teachers or teacher trainers. Lately literary theory has made a slightly shy entry into the ‘A’ level curriculum. Grand designs make good historical copy, and, at a personal level, can turn a career into a vocation. However, as an account of the discipline, they are aspirational rather than descriptive. Bringing purpose, direction, energy and commitment, they established a rationale for ‘doing English’ that many have found motivating and persuasive. But, alongside these strong, crusading narratives, English has always included a good deal of more mundane activity, a functional pedagogy of communication for instance, towards which some cultural missionaries have paid scant regard. There is something un-heroic about this aspect of English, a petty business that might detain preparations for the crusade.

In this piece I want to try to get away from heroic tales because I don’t believe them. Not being religious, I don’t need a substitute. And I do not believe that cultural criticism, any more than Leavisite habits of ‘feeling life’, brings salvation. Being a pragmatist (in the philosophical as well as the practical sense) I do not believe that there are any theories exempt from ideology or the claims of context and contingency. But I do believe that English is important and I want to go on working in it. Why?

I think this because I hold a cluster of beliefs about which I am prepared to argue – though not here in their entirety perhaps. I think, for instance, that great literary writing is important (though I don’t believe in a canon of ‘great works’ or authors), because aesthetic pleasure is an important resource in human culture and for human achievement. I think that the style of intensely dialectical, often unresolved exploration that characterises the intellectual achievement of major literary texts is a style of thinking appropriate to our times and human situation in which, as far as I can see, values are mainly provisional and consensual. I believe that the mode of knowledge with which we engage when we discuss literature – open, discursive, provisional, revisable, intersubjective – is emblematic of the way values should operate in societies like our own.

‘The mode of knowledge with which we engage when we discuss literature is emblematic of the way values should operate in societies like our own.’

In my humdrum, pedestrian map of the subject, English includes three central activities. It is, humbly, a three-legged stool if you like, and, in order to support any weight,
all three legs are essential. In no hierarchical order, there is, first, the cultural aspect, in which students and teachers engage primarily with literary texts (though engagement with other sorts of text is possible and, I think, desirable) in order to enable discussion of issues and values. Second, there is the functional or instrumental aspect in which students and teachers acquire and understand modes of communication and how to operate them successfully. Finally, there is the creative aspect. This is of increasing importance and includes not only ‘creative writing’, but also the broad appreciation of intellectual and aesthetic creativity and originality. This third aspect is a relatively late development in the evolution of the subject, and is likely to be a growth area in the future. In its pedagogy it highlights the necessity of understanding through doing – but that, I think, is characteristic in different ways of all three aspects.

Clearly these three aspects overlap, intersect and are mutually dependent. Understanding text in the ways indicated in the first ‘cultural’ aspect, for example, clearly depends on being able to operate successfully in the second ‘functional’ area. The different aspects overall are also mutually inclusive, and in describing them I have deliberately tried to draw them with wide, accommodating boundaries. By ‘issues and values’, for example, I mean not just politics, ethics or matters of ‘personal development’, but questions of cultural and aesthetic quality and importance. By ‘functional or instrumental’, I don’t have in mind merely the ability to write and speak effectively, spell correctly and know where to put an apostrophe, but also the understanding and appreciation of the function of style, argument and persuasion, and the way in which ideas are managed in intersubjective discourse. In the third aspect, functioning creatively in writing and speech requires some developed awareness of how effective communication has occurred in the past, and of the ways in which creative traditions thrive, develop and are expanded.

To describe things generally always risks stating the obvious, and I don’t think there is anything especially fresh or invigorating about these generalisations. What I do think, however, is that much debate within and about English in recent years has too often got bogged down, on the one side, in partisan and sometimes messianic visions of the subject, and, on the other, in the minute detail of operational matters like the nature of the syllabus or the protocols of particular assessment regimes. It is of course essential to be painstaking here, and to think operations through with care to consequence and efficiency. But I’ve increasingly started to think that such matters have come to preoccupy and distract, to clog things up in routine and bureaucracy about mark schemes, the checks and balances of a curriculum, the requirements of modular learning, quality assurance, and so on. Fair, efficient administration is always essential, but it should not make dismal or pointy-headed what is gratifying, generous-spirited and creative.

From time to time I am asked what it is that higher education wants from students arriving to study English. The answer, for me, is simple. I want people with experience of how to read all sorts of things (not just novels) with the skill and care of which they are capable. I want people who can attempt to communicate effectively and with curiosity, and who are concerned to develop this. Finally, I want people who enjoy reading in all of its shapes and sizes, and who take pleasure in appreciating or performing acts of language. Of these three, it seems to me just now that it may be the last that is the most important. As we speculate on how English will evolve over the coming years, there needs to be a strong voice for the pleasure principle and the joy of words, and an account of English that has this among its primary aims.
Revisionism in Irish and Scottish Literature: How far can we go?

In a paper originally given last year at an English Subject Centre event in Manchester (described below, on p.44), Gerard Carruthers, Lecturer in the Department of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow, revisits revisionism in Scottish and Irish Studies.

Much ‘revisionism’ in contemporary Irish and Scottish studies has concerned itself with challenging the ‘essentialist’ formulations of cultural nationalism. Looking on the face of this challenge, the modern Marxist at one extreme and the cultural elitist at the other can together beam approval. For both, vulgar bourgeois distinctions of ‘nationality’ or ‘region’, at least in the context of the British Isles, are ultimately to be taken out of the cultural and literary equation. Both the Marxist and the pure Aesthete might also approve of the conservative revisionist interpretation of many Irish and Scottish cultural and literary activists as key players in the construction of a British literary canon. Inferiorism or cosmopolitanism is the key: all cultural expression is seen to be ultimately sucked to the power centre of a super state.

The Marxist and the Aesthete (at least as these are at work in the United Kingdom), each in their own way, have a dislike of (‘minor’) ‘nationalism’ – but is ‘nation’ always to be consigned to a spuriously mythic category? Or, if it is, is not the ‘British nation’ perhaps even more of a ‘mythical’ beast than that of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales? Examining national aggregation or disaggregation: which is not the ‘British nation’ perhaps even more of a ‘mythic’ beast than that of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales?

Place is arguably even more difficult than in Scotland in the case of literary Ireland. What are we to do with expatriate or second and third generation writers whose work powerfully charts the experiences of the diaspora? Is Rhode Island’s Edwin O’Connor (who features, for instance, in David Pierce’s influential reader, *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century*) part of Irish or American literature? What of the Field Day anthologies’ collecting together of writers of the Republic and of Ulster? Is this a nationalist feit accompli – generosity or a failure in cultural discrimination? Politically correct revisionism often seems to mean that there are no longer to be any exclusions, there is to be no more exceptionalism.

Irish and Scottish literature specialists perhaps now divide into two camps. The first, the older veterans of the struggle to establish Irish and Scottish studies in the 1960s, is zealous in promoting the ‘national’ context as the crucial focus; the second group, very often hip younger Oxbridge types, practises a ‘four nations’ approach in the face of undoubted long historical amnesia about the importance of cultural borders and difference within the canon of ‘Eng Lit’. The first group insist on a more or less self-contained vertical cultural axis of reading; the latter look for the day when a horizontal ‘four nations’ approach is part of the basic tool-kit of the teacher of any of the bits of ‘British Literature’.

There are obvious advantages to studying closely a particularly Irish or Scottish axis: at the most basic level, knowledge of the Famine or the 1929 Censorship Act or the Clearances or the rise of the National Party of Scotland represent distinctive national moments. Thomas Moore and Walter Scott are ‘mainstream’ writers of the Romantic Age in some aspects, but also have to be under-

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1. Willy Maley (ed.), *100 Best Scottish Books Of All Time* (Edinburgh, 2005).
stood in their respective Irish and Scottish anxieties (albeit that these are perhaps often more to do with confessional rather than constitutional identity – reaction in Catholic and Calvinist contexts). In Anglocentric descriptions of Romanticism, however, we have the writing out of these two writers, who, along with Wordsworth and Byron, comprise the contemporary ‘Big Four’ of the Romantic period. This is a story worthy of some critical ‘self-reflection’: reflection upon the way in which ‘English’ cultural identity was, for a brief period at least – roughly between 1870 and 1914 – re-centring itself, often in rather exclusive fashion. Matthew Arnold’s influential invocation of a ‘Celtic’ racial gene in 1866-7 was really about providing for English literature a venerable pedigree that would allow it to stand scrutiny with the complex Greco-Roman convolutions of the ‘Ancient Classics’. Arnold finds ‘Celticism’ in such exemplars as Shakespeare and Keats, and ‘English poets’ are imbued also with ‘Saxon’ and ‘Roman’ qualities, making for an appropriately ancient and complex gene pool. (2) Following Arnold’s lead, the late nineteenth-century ‘Celtic revival’ in Ireland, Scotland and Wales (not to mention ‘regions’ of England such as Cornwall or the Isle of Man), demanded the isolation of the Celtic gene as a cultural birth right and thereby attempted to write out English or British cultural ‘pollution’.

The revivals of Irish Gaelic or Scots Gaelic or even Cornish are neutrally positive by-products of this new ‘Celtic’ awareness, but, on the other hand, we have also a dangerous denial of reality, culminating in 1936, for instance, with Edwin Muir’s dictum that the Scot could not with psychological wholeness write in English (this said, even at the same time as Muir was translating Kafka, who existed in an even more linguistically tramelled location than any Scottish writer ever did, arguing for this novelist’s wholeness of artistic vision and explicitly according to Irish literature a homogenous status). (3) Anxieties about periphery, and, indeed, the vaunting of periphery as representing some kind of primitive virtue can, of course, be read as part of the wider Western Modernist condition, but the periphery advanced in the case of Ireland and Scotland in the period from the late nineteenth century was perhaps too monolithically about nation, rather than being much more expansively peripheral, bearing in mind such factors as class, gender or even dialect. (In the case of the Scots revival of the early twentieth century, at least, language was subsumed all too simplistically within ‘national’ rather than ‘regional’ debates.) Arguably, simplistic nationalism precluded proper attention to literary life beyond the Dublin pale or in Aberdeenshire, and often smothered local strengths under the apprehension of national weakness. Such over-determined cultural and critical attention created somewhat impassable national iconographies, of imperious ‘Britain’, as much as of defeated Ireland, Scotland or Wales.

At the same time, new national ‘conditions’, however wrong-headed, sometimes were created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and are engaged with by subsequent writers whose work can only properly be understood within the time and space provided by courses in Irish and Scottish literature. Can we really understand the fiction of national scepticism, the work, say, of Mervyn Wall in Ireland or Robin Jenkins in Scotland, without ample consideration of the reaction against the romantic ‘Celtic’ nationalism of the previous generation in Irish and Scottish writing? Previous essentialist nationalist statements – either by critics or creative writers – have now created ‘objects’ that exist historically and which the revisionist must constantly revisit. Courses in Irish and Scottish literature as much as any in ‘Eng Lit’ are now in a position to revisit the sins of the fathers, and there is more than enough material in this soul-searching to power Irish and Scottish courses for many decades to come.

W.B. Yeats or Hugh MacDiarmid at their most florid or lurid speak nothing that stands much empirical scrutiny but represent cultural phenomena that must be explained. We may possibly, or even probably, doubt national Irish or Scottish cultural formulations, but because these ‘national’ formulations have been believed to have existed in the past, they continue to justify close scrutiny within modern courses on ‘national’ literature, even when our modern perspectives on ‘nation’ and ‘literature’ remain constantly sceptical about the basic concepts attaching to such notions. And in any case if a course in Irish or Scottish literature is hopelessly limited it is only more hopelessly limited than any ‘English Literature’ course, if at all, in rela-

3. Edwin Muir, Scott and Scotland (London, 1936), a book that is hopelessly Anglocentric both in desiring/idealising a completely separate national culture and in lamenting the fact that this is wholly unattainable as evidenced, in part, by the fully mature and organic culture of England.
tively small terms. Creative, not to say historically credible, identification of material is not really a problem. I know of one case of an academic objecting to the inclusion of Arthur Hugh Clough’s ‘The Bothy of Tober na Voulich’ in a nineteenth century course in ‘Scottish literature’, while seeing nothing wrong with the inclusion of Robert Burns in a course called ‘English Literature 1780-1820’. I see nothing wrong with the former case, and especially welcome the latter; among other things Burns was admired by English dissenting writers, and so helps exemplify a cross-border British dissenting intellect (the ‘canon’ of which remains to be properly defined in British literary studies) that crucially came to the fore in the early romantic period.

One possible bold manoeuvre that might be employed by the revisionist is to teach a Scottish literature course on how, say, William Collins, Wordsworth, Charles Dibdin and others contributed to the construction of the Scottish literary landscape; or on the way in which the Irish cultural background of Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser and Jonathan Swift make contributions to the construction of ‘civilised’ ‘English’ ‘cosmopolitan’ culture in the light of this ‘other’ background. In Irish and Scottish studies we are some way away from constructing such imaginative courses as yet. I suspect because (as with the taunt of the academic who objected to the inclusion of Clough on a Scottish course), we are afraid that there are those who will retort, ‘Have you run out of enough interesting native writers?’ The ‘four nations’ coin has begun to buy results in terms of the contribution of Irish, Scottish and Welsh writers to ‘British’ culture and literature. Rather less ventured, as yet, is the way in which ‘English’ writers have contributed to the modern formations of Irish, Scottish and Welsh cultures and literature; and this is a terrain those of us in Irish, Scottish and Welsh areas should increasingly be occupying.

The key point is that these ‘national’ areas are all sites of negotiation, and the intellectual rigour, the critical analysis required to traverse such terra incerta are exactly the same as for any such culturally centred, or self-scrutinising course in English Literature. Anyone still hankering for good old fashioned skills in practical criticism will find that Irish, Scottish and Welsh literature provide enough high quality texts to do enough practical criticism to last a lifetime.

I’m conscious that, in a sense, I’m edging close to the question ‘Are there things’ that the study of ‘English Literature’ can do that Irish or Scottish literature cannot? Or, ‘Should a cultured British person necessarily have read Shakespeare?’ My answer, is ‘No, not really.’ I would be potentially worried about a course in Irish or Scottish drama where the student knew nothing about Shakespeare simply because of his pervasive presence in the drama of the British Isles (in the work of an ‘Anglo-Irishman’ like William Congreve, say, or an ‘Anglo-Scot’ such as John Home). But this is not a problem that a little priming and even a little ‘peripheral’ reading of Shakespeare won’t fix. I’m hinting, I suppose, that the cultural cringe remains: we are to be ashamed, according to some people, of huge knowledge of a writer like Robert Burns (and funnily enough I can’t think of an Irish writer who works exactly like this – where Burns is just too Scottish), and relatively minor knowledge of Shakespeare. Much more permissible is to have huge knowledge of Shakespeare and no knowledge whatsoever of Burns. We have to start resisting such overarching attitudes: ‘British’/‘English’ prejudice (as often wielded by the denizens of Ireland, Scotland and Wales as by those of England) still abounds and we should not be scared to say this.

In this day of skills based learning, of transferable skills, let’s seize the ‘centre’ ground for Irish and Scottish literature; let’s actually believe that these are as valuable (not more valuable) than any other ‘canon’ of literature in terms of skills to be practised upon them, and of cultural and historical knowledge to be derived from them. The only resistance to such propositions actually lies in residual ‘British’ or ‘English’ assumptions about ‘wholeness’ or ‘bigness’ of culture, which revisionists in Irish and Scottish studies, as much as anywhere else, can no longer accept.
The study of English literature is already diverse and multi-disciplinary. It has left the strictures of formalism and new criticism behind and now studies far more than ‘the form, structure and rhetoric of texts’. According to the English Benchmark statement, it now looks at ‘their social provenance, the cultures of which they are a part and in which they intervene, and their treatment of ideas and material shared with other subject areas’. (1) In addition to an emphasis on material culture, English has also taken upon itself the mantle of philosophy and tries to grapple with some of the ontological and epistemological questions of our time.

This short paper contains a few preliminary thoughts triggered by a recent event organised by the Higher Education Academy on the topic of interdisciplinarity dialogue. (2) It takes three examples of interdisciplinary teaching and learning from my own institution’s English Literature honours degree programme and explores them to reflect on the nature of the encounter between English and other disciplines.

The main way in which English students encounter other disciplines is through the study of primary source material. My first example is from a Romanticism level two module which makes extensive use of art, amongst other disciplines, to enrich students’ understanding in three ways. Through the exploration of art and music we examine the meaning of the term ‘Romanticism’, in particular the time frames with which it is often associated. Through watercolours and oil paintings we investigate visual presentations of themes germane to the Romantic period. For example, the idea of the sublime is investigated by looking at the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, their emphasis on rugged mountainscapes echoing the interests of the lake poets. Friedrich’s interest in moonscapes neatly chimes with that of Wordsworth in the Lucy poems. Girtin’s watercolours offer insight into the presentation of ruins pertinent to the Gothic novel and to poems such as Wordsworth’s Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey.

Portraiture such as Haydon’s depictions of Napoleon and Wellington is compared with works by Friedrich and related to themes of the individual and solitude seminal in the Romantic period.

Finally, we use art to explore historical background – Delacroix for the idea of Revolution and what it might mean, Joseph Wright of Derby’s paintings for the impact of the industrial revolution, Reynolds for the cult of celebrity (linked of course with the idea of the value of the individual).

So what are we to make of this interdisciplinary exchange? It is certainly stimulating, broadening the horizons of the students, deepening their understanding and providing access to different epistemologies and alternate perspectives. Interdisciplinary approaches such as these have also acted as catalysts for more innovative teaching and learning methods. At BGC, for example, there is excellent use of the VLE to support learning of this kind, as tutors use the new technologies to provide audio, visual, and textual sources to supplement their own teaching. But there is more to interdisciplinarity than the accumulation of useful teaching materials.

Disciplines are discourses and Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism sheds light on what happens when discourses encounter each other. Dialogue may appear on the surface to be either friendly or hostile, convergent or divergent, but Bakhtin suggests that at a deeper level there is always a struggle for influence. When discourses meet, they are not willing to be drowned out by the other; unless they have no choice. Speakers will indeed listen carefully to each other, but they do so in order to inform and reinforce their own discursive position. Naturally, all participants in the dialogue are playing the same game and the result is rarely one discourse winning and the other being silenced. Instead, the outcome is what Bakhtin calls ‘dialogized heteroglossia’, which is the ‘co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and past […] between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth’. (3) This neatly describes the outcome of interdisciplinary dialogue.

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The English scholar’s encounter with other disciplines will not, therefore, be quite as open as might at first be thought, since any dialogue will inevitably involve a power struggle. Not all interdisciplinary encounters are the same, however, and the dialogic dynamic will vary accordingly. To simplify, for the purpose of this short paper, there appear to be two types of interdisciplinary exchange.

The first is when the partner discipline is rendered passive, such as when textual or visual resources are used to illuminate a literary text, something relatively common in the discipline of English. The Romanticism module described above appears, on the surface, to conform to this definition. We are aware of this issue, but see it as part of developing students’ understanding of interdisciplinary work. (The other two examples from BGC described below are at level three and offer the students alternative models of interdisciplinary study.) In this first case the other discipline can become truly the ‘other’ in the sense used by Edward Said. (4) In cases like this, the danger exists that the other discipline is silenced and exploited by English for its own purposes. The way the source is used lies very much in the hands of the tutor and the students. It is possible for the discipline to be presented as somewhat exotic or mysterious and there may even be an imperialistic undertone in which the enquiring discipline (here English) seeks to take what it wants from the other (in this case Art). Obviously the intellectual integrity of the academic staff, their understanding of the other discipline and their knowledge of the kind of exchange in which they are taking part will to some extent counter this tendency, but given the linguistic dynamic of dialogue, it needs to be recognised and explicitly acknowledged.

The second type of dialogic encounter is when a speaker from the second discipline enters the classroom to actively engage in literal dialogue with ‘English’ speakers. This happens in BGC’s level three Modernism module, where tutors are brought in from the Art and Music Departments to speak to and with the students about their discipline’s view of modernism. They bring with them source material (images and sounds), but more than this, they explain how their discipline interprets and makes sense of them, revealing and advocating their own epistemologies and using their specialist disciplinary languages.

In this case the other discipline has a more powerful and persuasive voice. English is less likely to be able to make what it wants of Art and is more likely to be troubled and changed by what it encounters. It makes the interdisciplinary encounter more open-ended, untidy and exciting. Maggi Savin-Baden is in favour of such an approach, because she believes that our curricula are ‘over-signatured’ and excessively authored. (5) She suggests that we should present students with more dialogic, research-led learning. Letting students hear directly from tutors in other disciplines is one way of achieving this kind of dialogue.

Where does this leave interdisciplinary dialogue? It indicates that like all other forms of teaching and learning, interdisciplinary methods are neither essentially good nor bad. Certainly, they enrich the students’ learning experience, because they open the student to new sources and perspectives, but they also have wider implications for the future of our own disciplines. Interdisciplinary dialogue can be used, whether consciously or unconsciously, to reinforce our own disciplinary discourse. It can allow English to define itself in relation to other disciplines rather as Said argued the British reinforced their own rational, civilised identity by interpreting the oriental other as their opposite. Arthur Applebee similarly argues in favour of a dialogic approach to university learning and views, in the words of the title of his book, the curriculum as a ‘conversation’. (6) Such an approach, he suggests, draws students further into the practices, mind-set and culture of the discipline in question. In this case, it can have the effect of helping the student become a fully acculturated English scholar.

Alternatively, interdisciplinary approaches can be used to change our very mind-set and to move us on from our existing understanding of what it is to be English scholars.

‘Any disciplinary dialogue will inevitably involve a power struggle.’

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This approach is as exciting as it is risky, because we are not certain where the encounter will take us and there is the possibility that our English identity will become ‘diluted’ (a word with negative connotations) or, more positively, ‘transformed’.

Interdisciplinary dialogue can, therefore, have two quite different effects: it can both deconstruct and reinforce the discipline of English literature. In my final example, I describe how it can be left to students to negotiate the verbal agon and choose the kind of encounter they have with the other discipline. In my own level three Postmodernism module, studied at the very end of their degree, students take part in assessed interdisciplinary dialogue. Learning outcomes, teaching methodology, content and assessment practices are all aligned, in the manner advocated by John Biggs, to promote and support deep learning. (7) Students take turns to lead a seminar on aspects of postmodern culture. They select a topic from any of the diverse manifestations of postmodern culture, such as music, painting, installations, photography, film, television, advertising, heritage, theatre and so on, and relate it to an aspect of literature. They are assessed on their ability to lead one seminar and engage in discussions that are, in turn, led by their peers. (8) It is not only their level of understanding that is marked, but the dialogic process that they adopt as they relate English Literature to these other cultural discourses. They are engaged, in microcosm, in grappling with exactly the dilemma that has been raised here, which is the problem of using other disciplines to open their minds to new ways of thinking about English literature without allowing the other discipline to deconstruct their emerging discipline identity. The exchange is always as unpredictable as it is thought-provoking — perhaps like all close interdisciplinary encounters.


In their recent study for the English Subject Centre, *Living Writers in the Curriculum*, Vicki Bertram and Andrew Maunder draw attention to the increasing popularity of modules on contemporary writers in English degree courses and the ways in which such modules can allow students to find their own critical voices, question issues of value and canon formation, and consider the importance of marketing and publicity in the promotion of new works. (1) In this paper, I want to explore these ideas in relation to the design and implementation of a level-three module on the contemporary bestseller at the University of Hertfordshire, entitled *Writing Now: Identity Politics in the Contemporary Novel*. This module, which ran for the first time in 2005-6, was to create a range of pedagogical opportunities and challenges and raise a number of important questions concerning learning and teaching practices: How might we teach contemporary bestsellers effectively? Which texts are suitable for study? How can we deal with the relative scarcity of secondary sources? And how can we use a module on bestsellers to encourage the enhancement of transferable skills?

**Background and overview**

The initial idea for *Writing Now* emerged both from a growing interest on my part in the phenomenon of the bestseller and from a sense that the Literature provision at Hertfordshire might benefit from a module dealing specifically with twenty-first century literature. Such a module would allow students to explore some of the recent trends in the publishing industry, to question the concept and nature of the bestseller, and to interrogate the variety of narrative strategies employed by such novels.

Of course, the range of possible texts for such a module is vast and after much trawling through the bestseller sections of Waterstones and Borders, I decide on the following selection, listed in order of study, for a thirteen-week programme:


The structure of the module sought to divide this material into three key sections. The first section would introduce students to the idea of the ‘popular’ bestseller through *The Da Vinci Code* and *Bridget Jones*. The second would move to consideration of more ‘literary’ bestsellers and prize-winners with *Atonement*, *Brick Lane*, *The Line of Beauty* and *Vernon God Little*. And the third would ask students to consider what I termed (perhaps problematically) more innovative narratives with *Life of Pi*, *The Lovely Bones* and *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, works which play with voice, perspective and chronology in intriguing ways. Throughout students would also be asked to examine the ways in which the chosen texts represent and interrogate various aspects of identity politics – concerning gender, sexuality, class, race, nationality – and how these reflect a range of key issues, concerns and anxieties of the twenty-first century.

**Pedagogical approaches**

As a new level-three optional module, *Writing Now* was extremely popular in its first year of running, with seventy students enrolling on it. Many of these were single honours students, although the module also attracted combined honours students and part-time students. The cohort was therefore extremely diverse and meant that we were unable to assume a common body of prior knowledge, experience or reading, something we had to keep in mind during the design stage. In the standard way, we had been allocated a one-hour lecture slot, which all the students would attend, and three seminar groups to be taught by myself and Tim Stafford, a visiting lecturer who has considerable experience of teaching literature in the School of Humanities at the University of Hertfordshire.

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Education and who was to be invaluable in helping shape the module and its pedagogical approaches.

What I was particularly keen to do with the module was to break with more traditional ways of lecturing and develop students’ competencies as independent learners in explicit ways. We therefore decided that in most weeks we would abandon the traditional lecture/seminar format which is the fundamental structure of most modules across the Literature curriculum and replace it with practical workshop sessions where students work in small groups on a variety of tasks and exercises designed to encourage autonomy and active learning. Week by week, therefore, students were asked to work on a range of activities which included the following:

- producing group responses to set questions on a specific text
- writing questions for other groups to tackle
- analysing specific passages as a basis for a presentation
- setting up debates
- rewriting specific scenes through processes of textual intervention
- sourcing information on authors and assessing its relevance
- sourcing and analysing theoretical writings
- comparing the styles of different texts
- comparing passages from the module texts on a specific issue with passages from more ‘classic’ literature (for example, Austen and Dickens)
- analysing and writing reviews
- analysing and critiquing internet resources
- analysing the possibility of film adaptation
- undertaking editing and marketing projects as if they were working in the publishing industry.

A few lectures were included on the module – specifically at the beginning or when introducing theoretical material – but the majority of the work on the primary texts was facilitated through this range of practical activities.

This break with the conventional teacher-led approach – what Graham Gibbs terms ‘closed teaching’ where learning outcomes are all but completely defined by the lecturer (2) – encourages students to work both independently and collaboratively so that there is greater potential for the experience to become one of transformation as the students move from a more ‘surface’ learning approach to a ‘deeper’, more reflective approach. (3) Indeed, as Paul Ramsden argues, ‘[t]he supreme purpose of such small group work is to encourage students to confront different conceptions and to practice making sense for themselves’ (my emphasis). (4) Certainly this more student-centred approach was well-received by the first year’s cohort and also provided them with the opportunity to develop that range of skills – advanced writing skills, presentation skills, research skills, team-working skills – which are central to both Dearing’s concept of lifelong learning and the current employability debates. (5)

Within this more fluid learning space, where we were asking students to engage in working practices with which they might be unfamiliar, it seemed important to establish some form of agreement on responsibilities. To this end, therefore, we drew upon the idea of the ‘learning contract’ as it has been defined by educationalists such as George Boak and J. Clark. As Boak notes, learning contracts function as an agreement between the learner and the tutor/facilitator on the rules and strategies to be employed in order to facilitate effective learning and teaching. (6) Used widely in a range of academic environments and situations, they are often designed to focus upon what will be learnt, but for this module we employed the contract to help highlight what was expected from each participant (tutor/student). Indeed, as Clark argues, ‘the metaphor of a contract is used to allude to the serious commitment participants will make’ and can often result in greater student motivation and sense of owning the learning experience. (7)

7. J.Clarke, in Boak, p.3.
For *Writing Now*, the learning contract involved the students agreeing to complete the reading of all primary texts; attend at least 75% of the scheduled sessions (a standard attendance requirement for the Humanities programme) although preferably all of them if the workshops were going to be effective; prepare for and contribute to all sessions; and be willing to engage in a range of practical activities designed to promote discussion and deepen understanding. On the other side, the tutors agreed to introduce theoretical frameworks for interpretation of the primary texts; provide a series of structured activities to facilitate learning; offer regular formative feedback; provide extra study material on StudyNet, the University’s intranet managed learning environment; guide students towards successful completion of all assessed work; and to organise regular opportunities for students to feedback on any problems they have with the module (particularly important, it was felt, for a new module). In effect, this ‘contractual’ agreement allowed the students to take control of the learning experience to a greater extent and made transparent the strategies by which successful implantation of the module could be achieved. Certainly it highlighted a collaborative responsibility between tutor and student which is often only implicit and which, in the case of *Writing Now*, had extremely positive effects as students demonstrated a strong commitment to the module through detailed preparation, effective group work and informed and energetic discussion and debate.

**Syllabus design**

As Allen H. Miller has detailed in his book-length study, *Course Design for University Lecturers* (1987), the design of any syllabus or programme of study can be an extremely problematic process and always requires careful consideration and justification. (8) This is particularly so with a module like *Writing Now* which makes great demands on the students in terms of primary reading (several of the texts, not unusually for bestsellers, are over 500 pages long) and where students need to be successful in their attainment of a range of different learning objectives. As I noted above, the module was designed with a fundamental tripartite structure leading students from consideration of ‘popular’ bestsellers to consideration of more ‘literary’ bestsellers. In the first three weeks, then, we asked the students to begin thinking about the whole nature of a popular bestseller by considering not only the key narrative strategies employed in such works but also issues to do with marketing and publicity. This is particularly important with texts like *The Da Vinci Code* and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* which clearly justify their position on a bestsellers course through their massive sales, but about which students might be prone to make easy and dismissive readings and value judgements. The module is not, of course, trying to recuperate either text as a ‘great’ literary work but rather to explore how and why these novels have achieved such popularity.

That said, however, we were keen that students would approach their work on *The Da Vinci Code* and *Bridget Jones* in an academically sound and theoretically informed manner, consistent with their work on the other module texts. (This was particularly important given that a number of students would choose to work – often very successfully – on one or both of these texts for their first piece of summative assessment.) To this end, therefore, we introduced each novel through a strong theoretical framework. With *The Da Vinci Code*, we examined the problematic nature of history and historiography, emphasising how history as narrative questions the notion of any one objective ‘truth’ and serves specific social, political and ideological ends. (In his rewriting of religious history in order to resituate Mary Magdalene at the centre of the transmission of Christian beliefs, Brown opposes established patriarchal religion and exposes the supposed suppression of the ‘sacred feminine’.) Although Brown’s use of history is in many ways ‘cheerfully sloppy’ (9), the text nevertheless works well in getting students to think about the slippery relations between fiction, ‘reality’ and history.

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the module). Students were next asked to consider the reasons why this text might be popular at this particular historical moment, using part of a December 2004 New Statesman review which linked the novel to post-9/11 fears of conspiracy theories, secret societies and fundamentalism. Moreover, despite – or maybe because of – its clunky plot, clichés and reliance on coincidences, *The Da Vinci Code* serves as a good medium through which to interrogate the key narrative strategies of a bestseller, including patterning, pace, the creation and manipulation of suspense, use of dialogue, setting and generic tensions.

_Bridget Jones*, on the other hand, was introduced through frameworks derived from cultural studies and third-wave feminism, again in order to demonstrate how a seemingly lightweight text can be read analytically and theoretically. _Bridget Jones_ has, of course, spawned a wide-ranging ‘chick-lit’ genre in both fiction and television (Fielding’s work is often compared with _Ally McBeal_, for instance), and we began by considering the feminist backlash against the _Bridget Jones_ phenomenon. (10) However, students were then encouraged to debate this viewpoint and explore the text in relation to the politics of the body, theories of performativity, the role of the alternative/urban family, and the potential reconfiguring of marriage. Further, in terms of style, we explored _Bridget Jones_ in relation to the _bildungsroman_, intertextual relations with Austen’s work (Fielding specifically highlighted the first _Bridget_ text as a reworking of _Pride and Prejudice_ and the second as a reworking of _Persuasion_), and the politics of the diary format as it has been theorised by critics such as Laura Marcus and Julia Swindells. (11) Through such approaches, therefore, we were able to help students see how the ‘popular’ bestseller can be theorised in many of the same ways and often as rigorously as more ‘literary’ works.

As we moved to the second part of the module, then, students were already used to reading bestsellers both in terms of narrative strategies and theory. With *Atonement*, _Brick Lane*, _The Line of Beauty_ and _Vernon God Little_, we shifted to more acclaimed prize-winners/nominees and sought to build upon the previous weeks by emphasising the detailed examination of aspects of identity politics and the idea of rewriting the classic which runs through all four texts. It was also at this point that we reinforced the strategies for encouraging independent learning by turning increasingly to workshop sessions and greatly reducing the time spent in the traditional lecture format. In a two-hour workshop on _Atonement_, for example, we divided the cohort into six groups, two of which worked on a number of questions on issues in the text, two of which analysed part of an essay on the novel, and two of which responded to ideas raised in a review of McEwan’s work generally. Students responded positively to the introduction of the workshop style here and the subsequent feedback plenary was extremely dynamic and insightful.

In subsequent weeks, students returned to tackling the texts through explicit theoretical frameworks. In the session on _Brick Lane_, students explored elements of postcolonial criticism (adaptation of form, voice, nation, cultural conflict, diversity and the ‘Other’) in a debate stimulated by close analysis of specific passages, whilst in the session on _The Line of Beauty_, we spent an hour discussing models of masculinity through historical and contemporary visual images (drawn from paintings, adverts and film) before interrogating the various constructions of masculinity in Hollinghurst’s novel. The following week on _Vernon God Little_ subsequently offered an opportunity to consolidate the theoretical ideas employed so far through reconsideration of some of the key concepts of postmodernism – the breakdown of grand narratives, the questioning of value systems, the decentered self and depthlessness, the fluidity of history, and ideas of metafiction. Using these concepts and David Lodge’s ‘five techniques typical of postmodernist fiction’ (contraction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, excess) (12), the students then designed their own questions on the text for each other to respond to. The questions – which covered, for example, the ways in which the novel satirises religion, the media and consumer society; the constructions and representation of masculinity and sexuality; and the relationship to the _bildungsroman_ and coming-of-age novel – clearly showed the students to be considering both the text’s issues and narrative strategies in ways which locked into the aims and the learning outcomes of the module overall.

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In the final three taught weeks of the module we sought
to build on the students’ developing understanding of nar-
rative innovations in contemporary bestsellers through
consideration of three works which play with structure,
voice and perspective in complex and challenging ways:
Yann Martel’s Man Booker Prize-winning allegorical narra-
tive, *Life of Pi*, Alice Sebold’s horrifying yet beautiful novel,
*The Lovely Bones*, and Audrey Niffenegger’s chronologi-
cally-complex fantasy, *The Time Traveler’s Wife*. These texts
sit well together in their use
of metafictional techniques
and students responded enth-
thusiastically to the analysis of
unreliable narrators, allegory,
multiple endings, variable per-
spective, generic indeterminacy
and intertextuality. Certainly
these three novels worked ef-
fectively to bring together the
interests and concerns of the
module overall.

Resource issues
As Michael Parker has argued in his discussion of resource
issues for teaching contemporary poetry:

‘We spent considerable time
with the students exploring
the potential of using re-
views as a springboard for
their own analysis.’


‘[The sparseness of critical material on much
contemporary writing changes the ‘politics’ of
teaching and learning, as lecturer and student
‘discover’ or, as post-structuralists would have
it, ‘write’ the work together.’ (13)

Indeed, many of the primary texts on *Writing Now* are too
recent to have been the focus of critical studies – particu-
larly given the length of time that it usually takes journal
articles or books to be published. So how can we help
students bridge the resources gap effectively?

Obviously we need to start by encouraging them to
think widely in terms of secondary material. In addition
to theoretical work and more wide-ranging critical texts
such as Clive Bloom’s *Cult Fiction* (1996), Steven Connor’s
*Postmodernist Culture* (1997) and Zachary Leader’s *On
Modern British Fiction* (2002), the internet is a crucial re-
source here. In order to get students to be more discern-
ing in the material they draw from the net, we set them
the task of sourcing a website on one of the texts we were
studying and then to analyse its strengths, limitations and
academic worth and post this on the module intranet site
so that it was available for the whole cohort. This material
was then supplemented by other useful net resources such
as the BBC ‘Interviews with authors’ site and a chicklit au-
thor discussion site. *(14)*

Arguably most important for the material we were
studying, however, are reviews and therefore we spent con-
siderable time with the students exploring the potential
of using reviews as a springboard
for their own analyses of the texts.
Halfway through the module, for
example, we allocated a week to
discussion of reviews both as a
means of commenting upon and
judging novels and as text types
in their own right. To this end,
students were given a review of
Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident
of the Dog in the Night-time* taken
from the *Guardian*, a review of Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx
and Crake* from *The Christian Science Monitor*, a review of
Michael Cunningham’s *Specimen Days* from *Time Out*,
and a review of an anthology of short stories entitled *Ladies’
Night* from *Heat* magazine. The range of sources worked
well in allowing students to consider the relations between
audience and issues of structure, style, register, judgements
made, and the proportion of narrative to exposition. As an
extension exercise, they then worked in groups to con-
struct a review of one of the module texts in the style
of the reviews we had studied in class. Although the task
produced some very humorous results (particularly those
reviews composed in the house style of *Heat* magazine),
this was a useful week’s work for raising awareness, on
a very practical level, of the ways in which reviews func-
tion. Certainly, the students were then more confident and
competent when engaging with more lengthy reviews of
the module texts for their assessed work.

Assessment
There were two pieces of summative assessment on this
module: a more traditional essay which asked for analysis of
some aspect of identity politics in two of the first six texts

\[13\] Michael Parker, in Bertram and Maunder, p.8.

\[14\] www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/openbook/openbook_interviews_
home.shtml; www.authorsontheweb.com/features/0402-chicklit/
chicklit.asp.
studied; and a one-hour in-class test which asked students to respond to a given passage from a review on one of the last three texts (*Life of Pi*, *The Lovely Bones*, *The Time Traveler’s Wife*). The test paper offered a choice of two reviews on each text and students had to engage with the points and judgements made in them by drawing upon their knowledge and understanding of the novels. This was a different assessment type from that normally undertaken but the majority of students responded well to it as a task which emerged out of some of the key concerns of the module overall.

In addition to these two pieces of formal assessment, however, students were encouraged to write critically throughout the module. One week, for example, was given over to a practical workshop on editing and proofreading. This was placed within the context of the publishing industry but was also geared towards the students’ own essays by asking them to edit and proof two introductions and two conclusions to academic texts and from this, as a cohort, to make a list of elements of good practice for their own writing. Further, at various intervals in the module they were also asked to submit commentaries on the issues raised by the texts, assessments of websites and reviews, and reflections on theory for formative (ungraded) feedback. Whilst this process could, at times, be labour intensive for the teaching staff, it nevertheless provided a forum where students could test ideas and reflect upon their approaches to analysing bestsellers when the normal resource supports were limited.

**Evaluation**

This was in many ways a fascinating module to set up and run, and questionnaires and discussion groups conducted with the first cohort of students revealed that the module was generally very well received. The students enjoyed the range of primary material, although many commented that the reading load was both heavy and costly (obviously there is no equivalent of the cheap Wordsworth Classics edition for contemporary writing). This will need to be reviewed and amended in the coming academic year.

In terms of pedagogical approach, however, many students were extremely enthusiastic about the move from traditional lecture format to workshop sessions since this allowed them greater opportunity to develop their own ideas and to take responsibility for their learning. Some, of course, still preferred the standard lecture/seminar distinction, but on the whole it was felt that the workshop had much to commend it by encouraging autonomy and creating a place where students could learn through processes of discovery. It was pleasing, then, to hear that many of them felt that the module had both developed their generic/transferable skills and increased their understanding of some of the key techniques and concerns of contemporary bestsellers. And whilst the module might often have been challenging for the teaching staff on its first run through, it was nevertheless also extremely rewarding as we explored new materials and tried out different learning and teaching techniques. Certainly the thirteen weeks from *The Da Vinci Code* to *The Time Traveler’s Wife* served to reaffirm a sense of the diversity, flexibility and inclusiveness of the English studies discipline within which we work.

As someone who is new to teaching contemporary bestsellers, I would be interested in hearing from colleagues on any of the issues raised by this paper and particularly on suggestions for learning and teaching strategies. I can be contacted by email on s.j.avery@herts.ac.uk.
News reports, personal experience, and hearsay all suggest a rise in plagiarism among University students that some observers say is reaching epidemic proportions. (1) Attempts to define plagiarism accurately have founded on account of the fuzzy boundary that exists between using other people’s ideas as we all do — and ‘stealing’ them. Shakespeare famously often drew on other people’s works, even echoing their language in places, without public acknowledgement of his indebtedness. Shakespeare’s knowledge of some of these materials and his use of them has been compared to what we would call ‘research’. (2) However, he wasn’t writing a university essay, but drama meant for the stage. It is only when we ‘study’ his plays in an academic context that these debts become obvious. Moreover copyright laws as we know them — which began with the Statute of Anne in 1709 — did not exist in Shakespeare’s day, and evidently the full concept of plagiarism which those laws reflect wasn’t available to him. (3) He borrowed ideas freely and left a legacy of literary texts that have been plundered for inspiration as probably no other writer’s has ever been, before or since.

But another canonical literary figure, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was certainly a plagiarist, disavowing his borrowings from German philosophy with a variety of ingenuous statements which were blown apart when his younger disciple and fellow opium-addict, Thomas De Quincey, exposed his literary thefts immediately after his death. And yet the book which included the most damaging of Coleridge’s plagiarisms, his Biographia Literaria (1817), is now studied as one of the greatest works of English criticism, notwithstanding those undeniable plagiarisms. It was regarded by I.A. Richards and the New Critics as a foundational text of practical criticism, and, paradoxically, has been hailed more recently as an exceptional early work of literary ‘theory’, flying courageously in the face of post-revolutionary English antipathy to Germanic metaphysical thinking. (4) De Quincey, Coleridge’s denouncer, depicted him as a kind of millionaire kleptomaniac, stooping ‘to flinch a handful of gold from any man whose purse he fancied’ while possessing himself the intellectual equivalent of the riches of El Dorado. (5) Ironically, later scholarship suggests that De Quincey himself was more indebted than he liked to admit to various recondite German sources in some of the popular writings that he provided for the journals of his day. (6) And yet many of us continue to regard De Quincey too as among the most quirky and rewarding writers of the nineteenth century. The literary canon seems to include some notable instances of indebtedness and plagiarism.

What are we to make of this? Are we as teachers of English being harder on our students than we are on the ‘great’ writers we teach as models of literary creativity? Should we be more provisional about ‘originality’ and allow for a degree of borrowing that is perhaps appropriate to much student work, if not published research? Clearly there is confusion as to what plagiarism is, whether this is genuinely a new problem, and, if so, what we should do about it. Sceptics have suggested that the supposed rise may be the result of sophisticated checking methods.

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1. According to a recent THES survey one in six university students admits to copying from friends and one in 10 confesses to looking for essays online (Jessica Shepherd, Times Higher Education Supplement, 17 March 2006, p.1).

2. The new Arden edition of Othello provides an Appendix with text from Giraldi Cinthio’s Hecatommithi (1565) and other minor sources indicating verbal parallels to an extent not acknowledged before. The editor, E.A. J. Honigmann, concludes, ‘Anyone who thinks of Othello as a short story blown up beyond its capacity should keep in mind that Shakespeare packed into it much miscellaneous reading as well as something not far removed from research; his perusal of very recent books on the Mediterranean world, on north Africa and on Venice’ (London: Thomas Nelson, 1997), p.387, italics added. Shakespeare’s sources are of course legion, and have spawned an industry of scholarship. Some standard works are Geoffrey Bullough, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, 8 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967-75) and Kenneth Muir, The Sources of Shakespeare’s Plays (London: Methuen, 1977).

3. The first recorded use of ‘plagiarism’ in the OED is dated 1621, five years after Shakespeare’s death.

4. As Leask suggests in his Introduction to the Everyman edition of the Biographia: ‘In a tradition such as the English, marked by a perennial distrust of philosophy and ‘grand theory’, the Biographia stands as a monument, however flawed, of Coleridge’s bid to base critical practice upon a philosophical deduction of imagination’ (London: J.M. Dent, 1997) p. iii. See also David Simpson, Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1993) which relates the culture of Anglo-American suspicion of ‘theory’ to the revolutionary debates of the Romantic period.


such as the JISC service whereby essays are run through a computerised searching programme which can identify the extent of indebtedness to a high degree of statistical accuracy (http://www.jiscpas.ac.uk). Universities across the UK have responded to reports of plagiarism by adopting ‘robust’ policies of dealing with it, at least one university student expulsion being reported in the last year.  

But are these policies misguided in isolating individuals without understanding a wider cultural malaise?

My own experience of noticing academic plagiarism is based on all of six years of teaching in the UK. I was born and educated in India up to my Master’s degree before coming here. My Ph.D. thesis in English Lit. at Cambridge was on (you’ve guessed it) Coleridge and De Quincey, both plagiarists – though my own Ph.D. I should hope remains unsullied, if only because I was careful to signal my indebtedness with reasonable care. What can I have to contribute to this discussion with my academic and cultural experience? Admittedly, all I can offer is an awareness of varied cultural assumptions about the matter, and not necessarily any decisive wisdom.

As a teacher of English in India before I came to England, I knew of only one mode of assessment available to undergraduate students. In the college I taught in, Loyola College, Chennai (1987-88), assessments were done in examination halls. One of my jobs was to patrol the exam hall looking suitably grave and handing out fresh sheets of paper to the perspiring students. It was tough for them. We did not stop to mop their brows. There wasn’t any question of plagiarism, as we kept an eye on students: the only copying that could realistically be done was in ‘objective’ questions. Undergraduate essays were certainly free of plagiarism of the kind that we are constantly punishing in the UK these days. The academic shortcomings of students were all too evident on the scripts we marked, and any excellence was equally evident. This is a tempting solution no doubt in an environment which after all prepares people for testing situations in real life. There’s no time to consult a book in most work situations. We are supposed to know our stuff if we have a degree in whatever it is we profess.

And yet, having grown up (and survived) such an undoubtedly rigorous system, I’m not entirely in favour of it. The exam hall measures performance under very limiting constraints; some of us were better at exams than others and this was not necessarily a matter of academic brilliance. Moreover, we did repeat other people’s views in examinations, and the format did not even allow us to acknowledge that in footnotes. At best we could signal our indebtedness to a critic or a critical text, and then go on to summarize (and, if we were truly rebellious, argue with) those views in an examination. One prepared for examinations by focusing on likely issues and questions, and even ‘mugging up’ quotable passages and phrases from primary and secondary sources. A lot depended on your frame of mind on the day, and ability to synthesize (rather than critically examine) knowledge. In comparison, the assessed essay allows for students to consider a question in depth, research other people’s views on the matter, and to provide a considered (and often considerably original) response to it. The best work that comes of such a system is immeasurably better than that which comes out of an exam hall. It encourages critical thinking of a higher order than the examination does.

It is the very freedom to access other people’s thoughts – nowadays delivered instantly through web searches, without the difficulty of traipsing down to the library and ploughing through books – that is paradoxically a liability to the assessment system, in so far as we expect students to labour at achieving a critical position. There is also the issue of acknowledgement. When students seek to borrow the words of others who have perhaps already expressed what they want to say pithily and attractively, such borrowings need to be placed within quotes, and an exact reference provided. But one may despair at being able to say something better than what has already been said, and one may be tempted to pass off as one’s own opinions that one indeed agrees with. I agree with X – or am convinced by his arguments – and hence I offer his words as expressing my thoughts on the matter. My mistake is merely not to put this within quotation marks and give it a footnote. The examiner may see this as a lack of engagement or understanding on the part of the student. But this judgement is not necessarily confirmed by the act of plagiarism. Coleridge apparently deluded himself into thinking that what he had worked out for himself philosophically had merely been put into print earlier in German by someone...
else (8) – hence it was hardly plagiarism to translate it back into English for his English audiences!

This brings us to a crucial distinction between an action and the agent of an action. The act of plagiarism often propels us into making judgements about the perpetrator of such an act. Plagiarists are condemned as cheats who debase the system. And indeed they often are. One does know of students who hardly attend classes, show no knowledge of their texts when questioned in class, and then go on to hand in an essay taken verbatim from the web. They are the ones who usually get caught. I would like to think, though, that these are the exceptions.

There are also the more troubling cases of evidently sincere and engaged students who ‘lapse’ into plagiarism in the final assessment, perhaps under pressure of other work or personal difficulties at the time. But most plagiarism, I believe, is of a more subtle kind, whereby other people’s arguments are merely reworded and passed off as original without due acknowledgement. Much of this passes undetected, or would be so difficult to prove that it is accepted as ‘derivative’ and hence meriting perhaps a low mark, but not a fail. Arguably some of this kind of plagiarism is unintentional as there is often a fine line to be drawn between what is to be footnoted and what is assumed as being well enough established as not to need a reference. We don’t usually need to footnote the source. We don’t usually need to footnote the source from which we’ve learnt the year of Wordsworth’s birth – whilst references to his spying activity in Germany (now disproved) are more likely to need a footnote. (9) But students encountering new information are often genuinely in doubt about what needs to be footnoted.

We also need to recognize that widespread plagiarism like any other social phenomenon is the product of a culture. For Romantics like De Quincey and Coleridge, the notion of their own originality was so precious that they were loath to allow credit to other sources, most of all when those sources happened to be Germans who were in competition with themselves for national literary glory. Ironically, by asserting their originality and affecting to despise their German sources, they exposed themselves posthumously to scholarly accusations of plagiarism. Arguably, De Quincey’s recognition of Coleridge’s essential originality despite his plagiarisms came out of his deep understanding of this situation.

Looking back on my Indian education, a lot of it did involve what might be called plagiarism – in the sense of unacknowledged borrowing of ideas – but it was largely accepted, as long as one could articulate one’s ideas coherently enough. But, by understanding other people’s ideas and putting them into our own language, as the exam forced us to do, we made those ideas our own in many ways, subtly altering them and fusing them with other points of view. This is distinct from ‘cutting and pasting’ or even the ‘disguising’ of someone else’s text so that it does not appear to be plagiarism. I don’t think it was bad practice at all. At least we were forced to make those synthetic analyses of other people’s arguments and views which some students now seem unable or unprepared to do. But it was forced in that we had no choice but the exam. Nor did we have ready internet access in the way that students have today. Our habits of study were different. Seeing my children grow up in the UK I am struck by how many of the ‘project’ work that are asked to do is accomplished on the basis of internet browsing, and even ‘cutting and pasting’. This seems inevitable, and I admit that all I do for my children is to insist that my daughter of 11 rewrites, by herself, the material she accesses in this way. Fortunately they are also given more creative exercises and examinations which keep them from relying entirely on the internet, but it isn’t surprising that web-reliant

8. In the ninth chapter of his Biographia Coleridge notoriously set forth his ‘defence’ against future charges of plagiarism: ‘In Schelling’s ‘natur-philosophie’, and the “system des transcendentenal idealismus,” I first found a genial coincidence with much that I had toiled out for myself, and a powerful assistance in what I had yet to do … It would be but a mere act of justice to myself, were I to warn my future readers, that an identity of thought, or even similarity of phrase, will not be at all times a certain proof that the passage has been borrowed from Schelling, or that the conceptions were originally learnt from him. In this instance, as in the dramatic lectures of Schlegel …, from the same motive of self-defence against the charge of plagiarism, many of the most striking resemblances, indeed all the main and fundamental ideas, were born and matured in my mind before I had ever seen a single page of the German Philosopher; and I might indeed affirm with truth, before the more important works of Schelling had been written, or at least made public’ (Nigel Leask, ed., Biographia, pp. 92-93). The most sympathetic scholarly account of Coleridge’s plagiarisms is made by Thomas McFarland in Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1969) pp. xxi-52; his most trenchant critic is undoubtedly Norman Fruman, Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel (New York: Braziller; 1971).

work habits are not easy to drop when teenagers come to the university.

Another difference relevant to this issue that strikes me between the university system in the UK and the one I experienced in India is that in the (fairly élite) Indian colleges I was lucky enough to study and teach in, there was never any difficulty of student recruitment. As teachers we never felt responsible for student numbers: that was a matter for the management to decide upon, on the basis of capacity. Indian middle-class aspirations for education are among the most competitive in the world, and we were readily supplied with full classrooms of eager students. The need to attract and retain students was something that did not impinge on me then, as it does now. Some of my colleagues attribute the prevalence of plagiarism to the poor quality of students, or the poor preparation that they receive in school. This does not seem true to me. My Indian students were learning English as a second language and were often quite weak in written and oral English. Though they were clever I don't flatter myself (being Indian myself) that they were any smarter, by and large, than their English peers. Perhaps they had a different kind of intelligence, more acute in certain kinds of empirical analysis, but not always so attuned to the kind of critical thinking we encourage in most Humanities disciplines in the UK. Again I attribute this to the cultural environment. A culture privileges the kind of intelligence it values. But they were definitely better motivated, and worked harder at their studies. Most students in those colleges, it has to be said, didn’t undertake any paid employment alongside their studies.

As teachers in India we also put more effort into teaching as opposed to research: more contact hours, more basic teaching, and close marking of essays. Research was not expected of us: we were qualified to teach and were expected to reproduce the same knowledge to successive generations of students without continually revising our thinking. Though we did not achieve spectacular results, we did manage to raise the average level of work considerably over the space of three undergraduate years. But teachers themselves very often stagnated, intellectually. New Labour’s target of putting 50% of young people through university does not seem to take into account properly the pressures this exerts on universities with regard to assessment procedures and standards. The introduction of fees has put an ever-greater pressure on students to complete their degrees as quickly as possible. The flip side of this thrust is that we are reluctant to fail students, and that students are often prepared to take short cuts in obtaining the marks they need to get their degrees. Plagiarism, then, is a consequence of all these factors. The ubiquity of the internet, the poor work habits of students, high critical expectations, governmental imperatives on student numbers, and low resource inputs are all contributory to the phenomenon. Until those things change, I doubt very much that the spectre of plagiarism can be banished from our midst. Ideally we need a system that will penalize the action stringently enough to act as a deterrent to further attempts, but also flexible enough to reclaim the erring person if that is possible too. For now, the best I can suggest is to devote as much time as we can to rigorous and closely-marked formative assessment in the early stages of the degree – at least as much as we can spare or our research co-ordinators will allow. (10)

Voyeurism in English Studies

Keen to find out what lecturers in other English departments get up to? The first tranche of English Subject Centre ‘case studies’ have just been published on our website (http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/casestudies/index.php). Topics include:

• Prison Reading Groups
• Teaching British Fiction between the Wars
• Teaching Students to Edit a Renaissance Play
• Theatre-programming as an Assessment Task
• Supporting Part-Time Tutors

The Subject Centre currently pays £150 for case studies. For further details, go to http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/casestudies/bginfo.php.

(10) For more on plagiarism, see the plagiarism pages on the English Subject Centre website (http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/plagiarism/index.php).
As academics in the Humanities, we spend much of our time grappling with the meanings of texts which are often obscure, and, even, downright difficult. Texts, short and long, in their original language and in translation, play a central part in our academic practice – and in our teaching practice. How can students, many of whom have been taught to use books rather than to read texts, and many of whom will not be devoting their studies to a single discipline, become proficient in the interpretation and understanding of these demanding materials? The authors of this article, one a Historian, the other an English Literature specialist, felt it would valuable to pursue these questions at an interdisciplinary level. We began the discussion last December by bringing together colleagues from the disciplines represented by three Subject Centres (English; History, Classics and Archaeology; Philosophy and Religious Studies) at a workshop held in Glasgow.

The day began with a ‘speed dating’ session in which participants, each assigned a partner from a different discipline, compared and contrasted their pedagogic approaches to two short texts specified in advance by the organisers. The rest of the event was structured around a series of short presentations, each of which stimulated detailed – and often impassioned – discussion.

A session on the topic of ‘Encouraging Students to Read’ began with an account by Keith Crome (Philosophy, Manchester Metropolitan) of the problems involved in teaching texts to Philosophy students. Catherine Steel (Classics, Glasgow) then introduced a Master’s level exercise – not quite a course – examining one text in considerable detail. After lunch, Margaret Connolly (English, St Andrew’s) discussed the problems of translated material. The day concluded with general reflections and discussion in a session led by David Jasper (Theology and Literature, Glasgow).

With such an all-embracing and important theme, it is unsurprising that discussions were wide-ranging – and therefore difficult to ‘capture’ in a brief report. What follows is an attempt to gather up some of the key points and concerns:

1. Keith Crome’s talk focused on the place of texts in Philosophy: while texts are self-evidently central to the disciplines of History, English and Classics, this is not necessarily the case for Philosophy lecturers and students. Dr Crome raised the awkward suggestion that being a philosopher might not involve engagement with texts at all, but rather be simply a process of mental exercise, followed by discussion – a common view in academic Philosophy with which his own recent project for the Philosophy and Religious Studies Subject Centre has taken issue.(1)

2. A pressing consideration for those disciplines that do involve textual study is naturally the cost and availability of student texts. Here Literature students are at a considerable advantage. In the words of the tutor of a nineteenth-century literature course (quoted by Colin Brooks), Literature students can ‘buy the books for the price of a round of drinks’. The philosophical canon is available in print, increasingly so online, as is a wide range of literary and historical texts. The same is true for the texts used by classicists, though here the position is complicated by the question of translation. One problem with online texts is the issue of authority. Whilst the editions used in big subscription-only services such as ECCO (Eighteenth Century Collections Online (http://www.gale.com/EighteenthCentury/)) are generally specified and scholarly standards high, many free e-texts are of very poor quality.(2)

3. Closely linked to the questions of cost and availability is the issue (the problem) of getting students to read long texts. Often in HE, what might be called ‘archival integrity’ is breached and extracts easily become the order of the day. ‘Readers’, the characteristic mode of bringing the primary sources to the student, some participants felt, compromised any engagement with a text unless the editor was extremely painstaking and extremely sensitive.

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1. The report on the project, conducted jointly by Keith Crome and Mike Garfield, is available at http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/documents/articles/text-based_teaching_and_learning_a_report.html.
2. See the 2004 Arts and Humanities Data Service report on this topic by Ylva Berglund et al. (http://ahds.ac.uk/litlangling/ebooks/report/FreeEbooks.html).
But the question of the ‘long text’ is not simply a matter of its cost or format. Student circumstances are changing rapidly: what might physically be involved for a student struggling to bring in money through part-time work in engagement with a long text? How do students find time to deal with, say, Middlemarch or Locke’s Two Treatises of Government? What advice are they given as to appropriate divisions of the text? The meeting heard about an English Literature module in which students were asked to read no more than selected chapters of a Victorian novel. Specialists in other disciplines were shocked by this, feeling that one did not have to believe in the notion of a definitive text to accept that such reduction would significantly alter the student’s experience of the text for the worse. Yet reading abridgements and bite-sized chunks simply replicates the experience of many readers of the past: the audience for the abridgements of Robinson Crusoe and other classics, for example, or for serialised Victorian novels.

4. Debate about the choice of texts is longstanding. To understand a culture, participants felt, we should not only understand the canon (the great books of literature have their parallels in the great crises and turning points – or is it the great essay topics? – for historians), but also grapple with the emergent canon (emergence being in our hands), and with that material (detritus?) which has been obstinately refused promotion. (3) Electronic resources now make it much easier to confront students with obscure – even completely unknown – texts, sidestepping the decisions of hard-copy publishers. Is this state of affairs an uncomplicatedly good thing, or is the challenge to the canon it implicitly involves in any way problematic? The question of canon has been a favourite of literary scholars and students; it deserves more attention from historians and from those responsible for setting examination papers. E.H. Carr famously dismissed the detritus of History by claiming that the history of Cricket would not be cluttered up by those ‘who made ducks and were left out of the side’. (4)

5. For some disciplines, the question of which particular version of a text is given to a student is crucial, and needs to be coupled with an awareness of the existence of different versions of the ‘same’ text. That is an obvious enough point with respect, for example, to The Prelude. Historians have been less sensitive to such issues. (5) It could be, and often is, argued that no texts are actually completely ‘singular’ or ‘definitive’. As some participants pointed out, the process of textual making can be as significant – the discarded preliminaries as revealing – as the apparent ‘end’ product. Equally, the ‘original’ text is on many occasions lost to us. David Jasper reminded us of how outstandingly true that was for the Christian Bible. The same holds true for much of the material used by historians: the notes of statements in legal cases, parliamentary diaries recording the speeches of other MPs and so on.

The emergent discipline of ‘History of the Book’, increasingly important in English Studies courses, is centrally concerned with these topics and in many institutions is involving undergraduates in activities closer to postgraduate research than to the traditional undergraduate essay – a development that has been greatly accelerated by the availability of facsimile online texts such as those included in EEBO (Early English Books Online (http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home)). For both students and lecturers, electronic presentation offers the chance for a multiplicity of texts to be encountered and drawn upon: discarded material can be revealed, as in the x-ray of a painting. There are many pedagogical possibilities here that remain under-exploited in our disciplines. (6)

6. How can we best help students become confident readers? Studying texts as part of a degree programme almost by definition will mean that students learn to view texts through disciplinary prisms. But what relationship should this bear to what we might think of as first-level undergraduates ‘naïve’, ‘innocent’ – ‘pre-disciplinary’ reading? (Or, is this the wrong way to put things? Some participants argued that there are no innocent readers, nor, for many texts (e.g. The Bible) any neutral readers.) What


6. This is the topic of an ongoing English Subject Centre project (http://www.english.hes.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/technology/tech20.php).


Teaching the Reading of Texts: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

benefits do a supposedly disciplinary reading bring to the table? And how might ‘interdisciplinary’ reading work for (or threaten the disciplinary development of) our students? How does a History student combine the study of text with the study of historical narrative? More generally, what approach can best engender confidence in students, giving them a sense that they can engage with the text on equal terms not only with the tutor but also with the ‘authorities’? Direct engagement with a text, after all, some said, takes away faculty authority. How can that be productively and not suffocatingly restored and maintained? Margaret Connolly insisted that level one and Master’s level provided the moments of disablement, the still awkward transitions often destroying student confidence (not least in calling into question the value of recently acquired, and hard-won, qualifications). The Scottish four-year degree system, it was suggested, brought benefits in terms of growing confidence over the longer period of time. Was that four-year structure a ‘luxury’? The parallel provided by the Irish structure (a Scottish system ‘squeezed’ into three years/levels) was noted. The implications of structure and length for types of understanding and cognitive development would make an interesting and important theme for a further meeting.

7. Close reading of set texts is — or can be — important to all the disciplines represented at the meeting. Yet it is a fact that the over-crowded curriculum has reduced the possibility for sustained close reading, with one week’s work rapidly giving way to the next. One way in which faculty can check on students’ learning is through asking their library for a print-out of books (from the module reading list) which have been unsuccessfully searched for over the duration of the module. Colin Brooks’s experience has been that the great majority of such books are sought solely within or very shortly after the specific week involved. Once the moment has passed, it is never reclaimed. Thus, for example, the twenty students taking the American Revolution module seek Thomas Paine’s Common Sense (four copies in the library); by mid-way through the following week, Common Sense is forgotten and attention has instead turned to searching for The Federalist Papers. Not least, faculty will probably be surprised at the student preferences thus revealed.

Against the rapid tour model, the benefits of sustained engagement were insisted upon. Participants agreed that it would be appropriate and necessary to read a passage, if not a whole text, aloud in class — and to re-read it. The issue of training in reading aloud, and the benefits thereof, excited a number of interesting comments. Silent reading is, after all, a relatively recent, even a strange, practice. It was pointed out that George Ross (Subject Centre for Philosophy and Religious Studies) had urged the deployment of advanced undergraduate mentors for level one and two students and that their work might involve joint reading. The benefits of ‘autonomous learning groups’ meeting in advance of formal sessions — something that is being taken up by an increasing number of English departments — were generally recognized: some felt, however, that faculty encouragement probably outran student enthusiasm.(7)

Catherine Steel, speaking of a Classics Master’s level reading module (not yet credit bearing), argued for the benefits of engaging with a relatively short text and in great detail. Such engagement might come before acquiring formal linguistic competence; engagement, the moral of her practice had been, provokes and fosters linguistic competence. That module, based upon a single text, available in an edition with a copious critical apparatus, raised questions of the student’s ability not only to come to terms with the text, but also to extract the maximum leverage from the footnotes. Are students taught how to read, and then how to use, such notes and commentary? They loom large after all: Harold Jenkins’s Arden Hamlet includes eleven pages of introductory editorial matter; one hundred and fifty nine pages of introduction; two hundred and fifty eight pages of text; and then one hundred and fifty further pages of longer notes. Within the text itself, each page consists of, on average, about 35% notes. Is coming to terms with such a presentation of a text essentially a graduate skill and accomplishment? The process of editing a text, too, has, some participants felt, much to commend it, not least as a token of employability, editing being so substantial a feature of Humanities graduates’ occupations. While applauding the practice and the ambition of such a module as Catherine Steel’s, however, the meeting noted with some regret that time, resources and the undergraduate curriculum would make it difficult to implement at BA level.

7. More commonly, such groups focus on writing skills rather than reading skills (cf. the English Subject Centre project described at http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/lit-eracy/lit3.php).
It was also argued that the chosen mode of assessment could be such as to provoke and require sustained close reading of a text. One method is the use of ‘gobbets’—though it was recognized that the gobbet as text itself raises numerous problems. Here, in the assessment of a module requiring intensive study of texts, the meeting felt, was another topic worthy further discussion.

8. The meeting did not begin from any presupposition that students were currently less able than they had been in the past. Nevertheless, the consensus was that many level one students were not prepared for the ‘critical’ reading presupposed by higher education. In part this was because of the surfeit of secondary material: of the ‘casebook’ type, for example, surrounding and stifling literary texts. Historians had recently heard that ‘A’ level boards, beginning with the good intention of having students engage with primary materials, had fallen away so sharply that examinees were now being asked to comment not on, say, Edwin Chadwick on Poor Law Reform, but on a Historian’s opinion of Chadwick on Poor Law Reform. It was pointed out that secondary texts might at least produce a model for student writing and argument construction; against this was the argument that the door was thereby opened to plagiarism.

9. Margaret Connolly discussed the teaching of Old and Middle English literature, raising awkward and wide-ranging questions of precision and authenticity in translation (including the question of sticking to poetry or ‘retreating’ into prose: there was general agreement that prose was more accessible, more familiar, to most students) and the pitfall of the apparently familiar word or phrase. With large student groups the level of linguistic understanding was often hard to measure; and reading aloud as a test for understanding, impractical. David Jasper urged that faculty should ‘get behind the linguistic challenge’; that language was a barrier could be a convenient excuse for student and tutor alike. Indeed, there was, some felt, a case for setting to one side (at least for the purposes of undergraduate education) any supposedly ‘original’ text: values, implications, resonances ought to be accessible through the reading of any version of a text—an argument at odds with the topic of point 5 above. Cranmer, Professor Jasper pointed out, committed himself to translating the Bible anew at fairly regular intervals, as common language changed: only thus could the word of God be made available to the people.

Against this, the loss of the opportunity to appreciate a text as a product of a particular moment was registered (even as the complexity of establishing what constituted ‘a particular moment’ was acknowledged).

These and other topics will form the basis for future events and perhaps also of other types of collaboration between Humanities Subject Centres. This is an area which comes close to the heart of what we believe we are doing as teachers (and researchers), and talking about it raises challenging questions:

- Are we in the business of providing certification (‘learn and forget’) or the tools for lifelong learning (‘read and reread’, ‘think and rethink’, ‘write and revise’)? The reading skills of the citizen, the common reader and the professional might be very different; but are they necessarily so? Ought the armoury of reading skills be common?

- How should we deal with the loss of control many lecturers report in students’ direct engagement with texts? Faculty try to fill the breach with yet longer reading lists—clearly not an adequate solution.

- What will be the place of electronic texts (and electronic textual analysis) in our disciplines? Are they simply tools or will they radically reshape the nature of what we do?

- How does ‘interdisciplinary’ reading work in the Humanities at seminar, course and programme level? What are the factors, both institutional and disciplinary, that inhibit and enable such work? (8) Should we be more open with students about the different approaches characteristic of different disciplines?

- In his talk, David Jasper worried that lecturers were currently deploying a pedagogy appropriate to a previous generation—in terms both of cultural familiarity and of resources. Is there a generation gap of this kind, and how should it be bridged?

8. Related topics are currently being investigated across all disciplines by Neil Thew (Sussex) in research for the Higher Education Academy interdisciplinary group. Cf. Sally Bentley’s article above, p.11.
• What is the best way to assess student reading? Is the centrality of the essay to undergraduate work in the Humanities under threat from upstart forms such as learning journals, creative writing exercises and online quizzes? And, if so, is this a development to be welcomed?

• How can we acknowledge struggle, even more so failure, as a valued learning outcome? How can we assess an evolving process made up of intellectual understanding on the one hand and immediate visceral response on the other?

• Are our students being suffocated by scholarship? Does over-attention to the footnotes – and to the importance of bibliographical citation in student essays – threaten the enjoyment of texts and inhibit undergraduate response?

9. Steve Poole (History, University of the West of England) requires students on his module on British art in the 18th century to provide responses to a series of images as the module proceeds (how they understand the image); these responses can be modified for a period of ten days, but are then ‘frozen’. At the end of the module, students are required to write about their changing understanding, using only those earlier responses as external material.

Through future meetings and initiatives, we hope to move closer to answers to some of these questions. If you would like to be involved in the planning of future events and projects on this topic, or would simply like to be kept up to date on what we are planning, please contact either Colin Brooks at the Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology (c.brooks@arts.gla.ac.uk) or Jonathan Gibson at the English Subject Centre (jonathan.gibson@rhul.ac.uk). Our sincere thanks to the speakers and the participants at our meeting in Glasgow for providing us with so much to ponder and argue over.
Creating a website that promotes essay-writing skills

Gavin Budge, Lecturer in English at UCE Birmingham, reports on his new essay-writing skills website Writing for the Reader (http://www.lhds.uce.ac.uk/english/writing4reader/index.html), put together with English Subject Centre miniproject funding.

My interest in creating an essay-writing website stemmed from the perception that most books on essay-writing, while making a lot of sense to university lecturers, who already know how to write, tend not to make all that much sense to students, who typically seize on one or two pieces of essay-writing advice in a one-sided way because they have no grasp of the essay-writing process as a whole: common examples from my own experience include the student whose writing goes through incredible syntactic contortions in order to avoid using the word ‘I’ in any context whatever, and the student whose writing is unintelligible because they have replaced all key words with what they assume are more impressive ‘synonyms’ from a thesaurus. Truly understanding a book on essay-writing involves appreciating that its writer has reduced the complex reflexivity of the actual writing process into an essentially linear form; but since such a representation of what is multi-dimensional by a one-dimensional line of argument is precisely what students who are learning about essay-writing have yet to learn to do, it is hardly surprising if they misinterpret essay-writing guides presented in the form of a book.

At the most basic level, an essay-writing website can be more accessible than a book on essay-writing, since it’s a rare student who will bother to take out a book on essay-writing; predictably, it will be most consulted by students in the few days leading up to a deadline. Although there is no shortage of basic essay-writing guides available on the web, most of the existing ones tend to be modelled on print-based forms, in that they give a rather linear account of the writing process which students are expected simply to read through. From a learner-orientated perspective, this print-based model is particularly problematic when presented through the medium of the web, since while it is more difficult to skim through an electronic text than through a printed one, material read from a screen in any case tends not to be absorbed as thoroughly. The tacit assumption behind a number of these websites seems to be that students will print them out on paper, but this presupposes what is probably an unrealistically high level of engagement with their content, particularly for a student who is facing a pressing deadline.

The other fundamental problem with most existing guides to academic writing, whether in book or electronic form, seemed to me to be that they don’t explain the purpose behind the advice they presented, a purpose often clear to those who have already mastered the craft of academic prose, but whose obviousness can’t be assumed for the students the guides are supposed to be addressing. Referencing conventions, for example, are often set out in considerable detail, but the purpose of providing references is rarely discussed. And yet all studies of the learning process show that material which is assimilated superficially, without an understanding of its purpose, is quickly forgotten, so that it is little wonder that even those students who have consulted a writing guide often fail to reference effectively, by which I mean not just with mechanical correctness but with an understanding of the rhetorical purposes served by referencing in academic writing. The only writing guides I came across which really attempted to address questions about the underlying purpose of the conventions of academic writing were Linda Flower’s Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing, (4th ed, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1993) and Mike Sharples’ How We Write: Writing as Creative Design (Routledge 1998).

The new essay-writing website I have produced, called Writing for the Reader, attempts to address the twin problems of misleadingly linear structure and advice which seems arbitrary because presented in a decontextualized way by systematically exploiting the linked nature of hypertext. To do this, I adopted the form of a ‘wiki’ (recently popularized by the online encyclopedia Wikipedia (http://www.wikipedia.org)), a kind of website which is particularly well adapted to producing guides because it facilitates extensive hyperlinking. Although most wikis depend on underlying databases, which can be quite complicated to set up, I was fortunate in coming across a piece of software, Wikidpad (http://wikidpad.python-hosting.com/), which implements wiki design principles in a self-contained program which can just be installed on a computer, and which will convert the final product into stand-alone web pages. Most of the textual content of the Writing for the Reader website was in fact typed directly into this program and then converted automatically into web pages, although once I got to about fifty pages I found the program became overwhelmed by the amount...
of content to track and ground to a halt, and the remaining twenty pages of textual content had to be created and linked by hand in a web-editing program.

Because of the learning problems associated with lengthy passages of electronic text, each page of text on the website is relatively short, roughly corresponding to a screenful. What the extensive hyperlinking intrinsic to the wiki-based design allows, however, is perpetual contextualization of key-terms, to each of which a page on the website is dedicated; those pages in their turn also use key-terms, which in turn lead to further pages, in a never-ending circle. The wiki software also keeps track of which pages are linked to a particular page, and lists their links at the top of the page, so that a student can see at a glance an entire cluster of inter-related concepts. From a learning point of view, these features of the design are intended to encourage students who visit the website for a ‘quick fix’ before a looming deadline to form a less limited view of what is implied by the advice on offer than they might otherwise do, since their perception of what the advice means will be continually modified by following the many links.

A subset of these pages, representing core concepts in essay-writing, have a small mindmap associated with them; these mindmaps link both to each other and, via a notepad icon, to the page of text with which they are associated, so that they can be used as an alternative means of navigating the site. The mindmaps provide more of an overview of the site’s content, and were in fact the first element of the site to be created, as I mapped connections between key concepts in Linda Flower’s *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*. These were produced using the mind-mapping software Axon (http://web.singnet.com.sg/~axon2000/), which is capable of saving its files as web pages. For those in search of a more linear path through the site, there is also a tree-based navigation system, but this has intentionally been kept very simple.

The design of the website is intended to model the essay-writing process: starting with an inchoate mass of related material, then progressing to the identification of groups of key concepts through mindmapping, and then finally devising a hierarchical and linear order of presentation through the Ramist tree-based logic of the outline. At an early stage in designing the website, I had planned to incorporate more interactive elements, but these had to be dropped as I realised that doing anything more sophisticated than multiple-choice exercises would involve an unfeasible amount of programming. Although a program such as Sheffield Hallam University’s Versewriter manages to use interactive elements very successfully, it can do so because verse has formal features which can be precisely described; academic prose, however, lacks such clear-cut formal characteristics, and this made it an unsuitable candidate for the kinds of interactivity that are easy to implement on a computer.

My major piece of advice for those who are considering website creation, particularly in areas related to basic study skills, is not to underestimate the role played by graphic design. Because, like many academics in English, I lack artistic skills, the design of *Writing for the Reader* is rather austere, and in retrospect it would have been a good idea to have budgeted for graphic design work. But although it can be useful at times to have some grounding in web design (particularly in html code), a surprising amount can be achieved outside web-editing programs such as Dreamweaver by employing more user-friendly software that is capable of saving its files as web pages; web-editing packages are probably only really necessary in the final stages of a project, where it is a matter of tidying up loose ends and linking the web pages produced by separate programs together.
Sensitivity to the theatrical potential of Shakespeare’s plays is the chief concern of this useful new series of student guides from Palgrave Macmillan. Each volume combines an 80-page scene-by-scene dramatic commentary with five chapters on miscellaneous background topics: ‘The text and early performances’, ‘Cultural contexts and sources’, ‘Key productions and performances’, ‘The play on screen’ and ‘Critical assessments’. Within these constraints, the authors of the first four ‘Shakespeare Handbooks’ to be published shape their materials quite differently. Even the order of chapters varies. Whilst the five background topic chapters appear in the same order in each volume, the commentary shifts about: after ‘The text and early performances’ in John Russell Brown’s Macbeth, after ‘Cultural contexts and sources’ in Lesley Wade Soule’s As You Like It and Christopher McCullough’s The Merchant of Venice and after ‘Critical assessments’ in Paul Edmondson’s Twelfth Night. Accompanying these structural differences are broader divergences in approach.

The scene-by-scene commentary is the most original and valuable feature of the series. It is, writes the series editor, John Russell Brown, designed to direct the reader’s attention to ‘actions and meanings not readily perceived except in rehearsal or performance’. Rather than anthologise the performance decisions of past productions — an impossible task in the given space — the commentaries give snapshots of key performance issues. Room is thus available for many different types of material: questions, suggestions and recommendations about how particular moments might be played, speculation about character motivation, reference to past productions, analysis of verbal detail, interpretation in the light of Renaissance stage conventions, arguments in favour of a particular way of seeing the play, and so on. Handbook authors thus have considerable latitude.

Brown himself, in the commentary in his volume on Macbeth, is nicely sensitive both to brute spatial organisation (‘After entering, Lady Macbeth must in some way dispose of the light in order to wash her hands’ (76)) and to the interplay of verbal texture and event (‘Jocund’ is a light-hearted, cheerful word that that brings a surprising change of mood that progressively creates a barrier between them’ (50)). His commentary tracks Macbeth moment-by-moment, one or more lines at a time, focusing in on points where the need to take clear interpretative decisions is particularly important. Alertness to the imbrication of text and performance leads to some striking passages, such as his observation about Macbeth’s instructions for Banquo’s murder:

From its start, this private encounter is difficult to act, for the actors and for the persons in the play, and that was probably Shakespeare’s intention because the suggestion of unspoken restraints and pressures beneath the words takes the play’s action into new, clandestine territory in which the hero will seem belittled and his concerns trivialised. (48)

Of all the four handbook authors, Brown provides the least build-up to his commentary: all that precedes it is a pithy chapter on the text and early performances. Everything else follows, and therefore allows students...
Christopher McCullough’s commentary for The Merchant of Venice is more straightforward and obviously functional than Brown’s for Macbeth – more of a vade-mecum for directors. It begins with a handy introductory list of key issues and a brief scene-by-scene plot summary. The commentary’s account of each scene is divided up into sections on ‘Plot objectives’, ‘Setting’ and ‘Action, language and actors’. Such a sharply-defined structure, though making it hard for McCullough to be as flexible in his analysis as Brown, allows him to provide readers with performance information in a very clear and accessible form. It also underpins one of the great strengths of his commentary, its emphasis on setting and theatrical space (‘Where is Bassanio on stage in order to hear Portia’s remarks?’ (163)). McCullough’s analysis of the play, peppered with enlivening questions, moves constantly and valuably in the direction of practical tips: discussing the trial scene, for example, he argues that ‘To allow actors to play with this scene before any kind of staging decisions are introduced will give a vitality that, otherwise, could easily be missed’ (144).

Accompanying the commentary in McCullough’s contextual chapters is a bewildering gallimaufry of material: inter alia, a good examination of the distinction between ‘script’ and ‘text’ (1-8), Matthew Arnold’s poem on Shakespeare (11), five pages on the legal status of Elizabethan acting companies (16-21), four pages on Hamlet’s advice to the players (26-9) and an interview with Antony Sher (47-55). This embarras de richesses, never less than stimulating, seems to have limited the space available for the treatment of more conventional topics such as literary genre, Judaism, commerce and the Elizabethan legal system. It also seems to have edged out the comprehensive treatment of Shakespeare’s source material that is such a valuable feature of the four other Handbooks reviewed here.

Paul Edmondson’s commentary on Twelfth Night reads the play from the point of view of a spectator seeing it for the first time, unaware of the names or relationships of any of the characters (‘The young woman speaks first. Her question betrays a sense of confusion as she tries to re-establish control and order’ (89)). The coup de théâtre Edmondson works towards is the revelation of Viola’s name in the final scene of the play (160). His commentary is full of creative uncertainty about the way in which specific moments might be staged. Tagging his interventions, like Brown, line by line, Edmondson leaves himself sufficient room for a supple, freewheeling approach to both text and action. Like Brown again, Edmondson comes up with some resonant formulations – for example, his comment on the climactic meeting of Viola and Sebastian:

It may be helpful to think about the dramatic texture of the next few minutes as taking place out of time, in a heightened sphere of emotional reality, with the script representing the characters’ inner thoughts and feelings rather than only their verbal expression. (159)

Of the four volumes it is Edmondson’s that comes closest to fulfilling Brown’s hope that the commentary will ‘offer an experience as close as possible to an audience’s progressive experience of a production’ (viii).

Edmondson places his commentary last, having carefully laid out in his other chapters an enticing smorgasbord of important contexts, including a props list, a table listing Irving’s rearrangement of scenes and a table of plot elements shared between Twelfth Night and other works by Shakespeare. There are also passages from key sources, a fleet-footed summary of critical approaches, good material on performance history and some appealingly silly jokes. Edmondson’s fresh, spectator-response approach to the commentary means that when it finally arrives it is not bowed down by this rich array of contexts, but deftly slips their traces.

Lesley Wade Soule’s commentary for As You Like It seems a bit more prescriptive than the commentaries in the other volumes. Part of its function is to back up and cash out her persuasive emphasis – set out in advance of the commentary, in chapters on ‘Text and early performance’ and ‘Cultural contexts and sources’ – on the play’s metatheatrical and pageant-like qualities (‘As any actor’s pretence requires the assistance of the spectator, Rosalind’s performance is helped by Orlando’s eagerness to cast her in the role of his “Rosalind”’ (96)). Soule asserts her control over the commentary by starting the section on each scene with a short summary picking out key themes. A particularly arresting feature is the generalised way in which she writes about Shakespeare’s language. She includes no direct quotations from the play and does not analyse the play’s images or verbal texture in any detail. That this is no accident is suggested by her quotation late in the book of John Russell Brown’s warning that ‘Shakespeare’s verbal art... is, in fact, a
trap; it can prevent us from inquiring further” (162 (1)), a
dictum that, ironically, her commentary puts into practice
far more thorough-goingly than Brown’s own commentary
for Macbeth. Character motivation is important to Soule (as
for example in her analysis of possible reasons for Oliver’s
volte-face (102), an emphasis which sits intriguingly alongside
her argument earlier in her Handbook that dramatic charac-
ters should be viewed as discontinuous entities (41-2). There
are some nice aperçus—the bossy Rosalind of Act V is ‘like a
sports teacher’ (116) – and an extensive and well-organised
anthology of source material.

On the face of it, it is surprising that such a performance-
oriented series contains no illustrations—no photographs of re-
cent productions, no diagrams of the Globe. (2) Is this simply a
matter of cost? Or did the publishers and series editor worry
that the inclusion of visual images might limit readers’ sense of
the full range of performance possibilities? Was it felt that re-
stricting the authors to the written word might help engender
a more flexible and holistic sense of the plays’ theatricality?
In the event, the vividness of the writing in these Handbooks
means that the absence of visual stimuli does not at all feel like
drawback. More significant, perhaps, is the comparative ab-
sence of cross-referencing, an omission (more or less essential
on grounds of space) that makes it difficult for the authors to
construct pathways between the commentaries and the other
chapters. Many topics introduced in the contextual chapters
(Elizabethan attitudes to primogeniture in the As You Like It
volume, for example) cry out for, but lack detailed exemplification
in the commentary.

In the absence of a hyperlinked web edition (3), the onus
is on the Handbook writers to provide students with guide-
ance on how to navigate the extensive information provided.
This is an area where more consistency between the authors
might have been hoped for; as the books vary quite consid-
erably in the amount of ‘scaffolding’ they give. Edmondson
probably provides most overall (together with an excellent
annotated bibliography) whilst McCullough is particularly
helpful in the opening section of his commentary. Brown’s
eloquent analyses, on the other hand, tend to be rather mini-
masively annotated: his invaluable extracts from Holinshed, for
example, are given without textual references of any type,
putting the brake on any interested undergraduate keen to
investigate further. The discussion of textual matters in all
four books is also minimally referenced. Meanwhile, even the
choice of editions differs from Handbook to Handbook: each
author cites a favourite critical edition (McCullough uses
John Russell Brown’s New Arden Merchant of Venice, Brown
himself G.K. Hunter’s New Penguin Macbeth and so on),
whilst references to other Shakespeare plays uniformly cite
the Oxford collected works. This seems eccentric: would it
not have been easier simply to put all the eggs in one basket
and make things easier for everyone by citing the Oxford
text throughout?

A number of very obvious questions are likely to occur
on any student faced with one of these volumes. How (and
when) should the commentary be read? Should the student
read it all in one go, having read (or seen, or heard) the
whole play? Or is she meant to read it alongside the play,
looking scenes up in the commentary as soon as she has
read them? How (and, again, when) should she bring the ma-
terial in the very diverse contextual chapters to bear on
the play? An introductory section (‘How to use this book’)
broaching some of these questions and offering readers a
range of possible pathways would help. And perhaps a little
more emphasis on the inevitably subjective nature of each
Handbook would have been salutary.

Quibbling too much, though, seems churlish: each of
these first four volumes casts fresh light on the play in hand;
each author is an engaging and well-informed guide to his or
her play. It will be interesting to see how future contributors
adapt their materials to the series’ ambitious brief.

1. Quoted from Brown’s Shakespeare’s Plays in Performance (1966).
2. Cf., for example, the new ‘Sourcebooks Shakespeare’ series – editions
of the plays that come with copious illustrations and a CD containing
videos of selected scenes in performance.
3. On the value of non-sequential, hyperlinked text for students, see
Gavin Budge’s article on p. 29 of this newsletter.
Famous English Graduates

Jane Gawthrope (English Subject Centre)

One of the questions the Subject Centre is asked most frequently, especially by school teachers and those running open days, is 'Can you tell me the names of some famous people who studied English?' We offer a few examples below and welcome additions to the list, especially of non-literary figures who demonstrate the range of career destinations of the English graduate. (Please email jane.gawthrope@rhul.ac.uk). My thanks to Simon Dowling, Head of English at Colchester Royal Grammar School, for his assistance in compiling this list.

Living

Paul Ackford – England rugby international and columnist (Kent)

Mike Baker – BBC Education Correspondent (Emmanuel, Cambridge)

Sir Ian Blair – Metropolitan Police Commissioner (Christ Church, Oxford)

Quentin Blake – author and illustrator of children’s books (Downing, Cambridge)

Mark Ellingham – co-founder and publisher of the ‘Rough Guides’ (Bristol)

Gavin Esler – BBC TV journalist (Kent)

Stephen Fry – actor, director, writer (Queen’s, Cambridge)

Charlotte Green – BBC radio newsreader (Kent)

Colin Greenwood – musician with Radiohead (Peterhouse, Cambridge)

Ian Hislop – editor of Private Eye (Magdalen, Oxford)

Natasha Kaplinsky – BBC presenter (Hertford College, Oxford)

Jemima Khan – UNICEF Special Representative (Bristol)

Mark Knopfler – guitarist and singer with Dire Straits (Leeds)

Sally Lindsay – actress who plays Shelley in Coronation Street (Hull)

Alistair McGowan – Radio presenter and TV actor (Leeds)

Rosamund Pike – actress with roles in Die Another Day and Pride and Prejudice (Oxford)

Emma Thompson – actor and screen writer (Newnham, Cambridge)

Tom Wilkinson – actor (The Full Monty) (Kent).

Deceased

Douglas Adams – writer of The Hitch-Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy (St John’s, Cambridge)

Richard Burton – actor (Exeter College, Oxford)

Sidney Gilliat – film director and screen writer (London)

Russell Harty – TV broadcaster, (Exeter College, Oxford)

(Due to his entry in the Dictionary of National Biography he ‘was taught by Nevill Coghill, who noted of an early essay, Sex in the Canterbury Tales’, ‘Energetic and zealous but very naïve’.)

Derek Jarman – film-maker, painter and campaigner for homosexual rights (King’s, London)

David Montagu – merchant banker and Liberal peer (Trinity, Cambridge). (His entry in the Dictionary of National Biography says that he studied English literature ‘having tried law and economics but found them too dull’. His foremost legislative achievement as a peer was to make rear lights on bicycles compulsory.)

Naomi Porter – fashion designer, (Royal Holloway, London)
As is normal with smaller conferences, it is both easy to get an idea of the general opinions of the participants in general – these participants were, after all, uniform in being required by their universities to ‘do’ e-learning – and much easier to contribute to the sentiments the conference helps to express. The following featured heavily in discussion:

1. Beyond an archival function (‘lost your module guide? can’t get the reading? it’s on the web’) there are no immediately apparent uses for e-learning in the humanities – it is, by and large, not a tool that has been supplied in response to a widespread demand.

2. There are no rewards for doing e-learning. It is not factored into workloads as something that needs an investment of lecturer’s time if it is to deliver the enriched learning experienced expected.

3. Students will probably negate the paper-saving possibilities of virtual learning environments by just printing files out.

4. Students will by and large not use a virtual learning environment unless they are assessed in doing so, and they will use it unimaginatively if their participation is assessed.

5. One other probable result of shifting students further into virtual learning environments is that they will become versatile internet plagiarists.

6. Alternatives to the virtual learning environments Blackboard and WebCT are necessary.

7. The unquestioned assumption at the root of the pressure put on us to ‘do’ e-learning is: ‘It must be good, or at least useful, because it’s ‘e’’.

8. The emphasis on student activity that results from the use of most e-learning tools is the main impetus in getting what Stuart Boon called its ‘champions’ to use it.

9. ‘E-learning’ for many rightly represents a lengthening of the list of pieces of technology that can malfunction or be incompatible with each other.

10. Related to point 1, there is a voluntary impetus amongst academics to use virtual learning environments but little corresponding theorising of what function they can actually perform in relation to face-to-face teaching, little idea about when not to use e-learning, the ‘Announcements’ function of Blackboard being a typical problem-causing ‘tool’.

An example of the last point underlay the event. On the one hand, Brett Lucas (English Subject Centre) wanted desperately to know how academics thought e-learning could be useful for them, particularly given the money the Subject Centre was able to make available for pioneering projects. On the other hand, the academics wanted to know just what was meant by ‘e-learning’, what the technologies were and how they worked, reflecting a widespread lack of training in universities. I became aware of how little I know, coming away, for example, wanting to know what my university at the time had done with the £150,000 given to it in May 2005 to develop e-learning.
Nonetheless, there were involving examples of how software has been used, including Rosie Miles on how to use discussion forums to properly make class time the tip of the iceberg, Gail Ashton on student behaviour in discussion forums, Alice Jenkins on how the instant feedback aspect of electronic voting systems can reliably get all 150 students in the lecture room able to identify ‘iambic tetrameter’ in ten minutes, and Stuart Lee on the Learning Activity Management System (http://www.lamsinternational.com/about/), whose ‘learning designs’ enable students to complete work online in a linear fashion as opposed to the ‘web page’ format of the average virtual learning environment. One thing that became apparent was that our universities’ intended meaning of ‘e-learning’ – converting our teaching into a distance-friendly and reproduction-friendly format – was not what we were finding the technologies useful for. BlackBoard’s status as a ‘[p]rovider of products that enable universities, schools, and corporations to host their classes on the World Wide Web’ (http://www.blackboard.com/us/index.aspx) is not compatible with what we do.

Brett’s overview was hugely informative on the language and categories of e-learning, mostly absent from what university-specific training exists. Stuart Boon’s summary of his AHRC-funded project on ‘Information Literacy’ pointed out the gap in the average humanities degree where teaching students how to research should be an essential palliative for some of the endemic problems in getting internet-literate students to write. ‘Epic’, the 2014-based account of the ascendancy of corporate control of internet content, by Robin Sloan and Matt Thompson (http://www.robinsloan.com/epic/), shown by Sue Thomas, gave a shocking account of the power politics of the internet, although her argument that it is the responsibility of academics to blog had a mixed reception. Lawrie Phipps from the accessibility educational advisory service TechDis (http://www.techdis.ac.uk/) presented in an area widely neglected in the majority of virtual learning environments, most of which are haphazardly put together: protocols governing how virtual learning environments should look. And Hermann Moisl pointed out not only that we need to use e-learning tools like we use whiteboards, but also that the lack of any institutional commitment in UK universities to working out how to best employ virtual learning environments – resulting in considerable stress for academics being told to use them – was a part of a general impoverishment of teaching by the new research-led conception of the university.

The consensus at the end of the event was positive: the extra time needed to deliver e-learning must be addressed by commitments at a higher level – it can’t just be the thing that a handful of champions do and that is done in addition to existing workloads. Because most of us who use virtual learning environments do not actually do e-learning – since the wholesale dumping of content to students is no guarantee that they will do anything with it – academics’ choice about using e-learning should be the same choice about whether to pick up the board marker at a particular point in class, not a response to an imperative to use it. An account of when not to use e-learning is necessary to make e-learning a teaching tool, and I vowed to gut my Blackboard sites of counter-productive functions immediately. Nonetheless, the e-learning techniques I came away having decided to use to make my modules work harder included peer-monitored and assessed forum tasks, the use of images with alt-tags, live discussion rooms as a way of enforcing good seminar etiquette, and making colleagues who do not use virtual learning environments get rid of any sites set up for them since empty websites encourage students to ignore virtual learning environments in general. I also became aware that there are websites that can be used to develop teaching, not least the oddly-named ‘T3’ pages on the English Subject Centre’s website (http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/t3/index.php), for sharing ideas about ways of structuring English seminars. As ever, organisers Stacy Gillis, a lecturer who makes use of virtual learning environments, and Brett Lucas, a learning technologist, made a perfect e-learning double-act, their partnership being a result of successfully turning ‘e-learning’ into good teaching. If you have a vague idea that these tools may be useful, you’ll find on the English Subject Centre website that you’re not alone.
The central idea behind the CAPITAL Centre, funded by HEFCE under its CETL (Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning) initiative, is that the arts and practices involved in making theatre are closely allied to those that foster the best in many dimensions of teaching, learning and the dissemination of transferable skills. A partnership between the University of Warwick and the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Centre builds on an existing collaboration in process since 2002. With the help of additional funding from HEFCE in January of this year, the collaboration will be extended to include the Shakespeare Institute of The University of Birmingham, to reinforce the position of Stratford-upon-Avon and the West Midlands as a centre of excellence in theatre and literary studies.

The aim of the Centre, led by Professors Jonathan Bate and Carol Rutter, is to foster and disseminate widely – through the University of Warwick, in the local community, nationally and internationally through online delivery – an approach to teaching and learning that emphasises the arts of imagining other minds, role-play and improvisation, trust and teamwork, as a paradigm of discovery throughout the creative process.

The Centre was formally launched on 23 February 2006 though it came into existence almost a year ago. The first year of CAPITAL is being viewed as a Laboratory Year to test a number of teaching and learning options within Warwick’s Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies and the School of Theatre Studies. Our objectives have been to enable students to move from the texts of literature to the texts of performance; to offer them an opportunity to engage with one kind of text through lecture and seminar teaching and learning and the other kind through creativity and performance.
masterclasses and workshops; and to imagine, devise and begin real research work not just on Shakespeare and his contemporaries but on new writing and writers, in partnership with practitioners and specialist research collections.

Theatre visits have supplemented the study of plays already in the syllabus or provided a focus for improvised work which may lead to practical performance. In several cases it has been possible to enhance a theatre visit with additional events and work involving practitioners based on play/production. Duska Radosavljevic, the RSC’s Higher Education Programme Manager, who is CAPITAL’s primary link with the Company, describes one of these events below. Where an event is not an integral part of a course students have been asked to volunteer and colleagues involved have agreed to include in the assessment process an opportunity for these students to use the experience they have gained.

In CAPITAL’s second year the workshop model of learning will be embedded into the curriculum and new programmes of study will be created. For example a third-year undergraduate module in English and Comparative Literary Studies titled ‘From Page to Stage: Modes of Production and Reception’ has been created by Paul Prescott, CAPITAL Centre Lecturer and Duska Radosavljevic, which aims to break down barriers between the theatre and the academy to investigate and pioneer non-traditional modes of teaching. Discussions are well advanced for a module on Teaching Shakespeare for 2007/8 which will combine RSC workshop techniques, traditional Shakespeare lectures and teaching practice in schools carrying credits towards a Postgraduate Certificate of Education. Introducing an enlarged element of practical work to these courses has highlighted the need to review and extend assessment methods for literature courses beyond the traditional essay or examination paper and to learn from other disciplines like drama and theatre studies, for example the use of video and experiential journals.

A number of other CAPITAL initiatives will come on stream in the next academic year. The first RSC/Warwick Playwright in Residence will be in post in June and will contribute to a new module in Writing for Theatre and Performance and to the Warwick Writing Programme. Fellowships in Creativity and Performance will be inaugurated, offering support to both theatre practitioners and academics for projects which explore approaches to teaching and learning which emphasise the arts of imagining other minds, role play, improvisation, trust and teamwork. A production of Lope de Vega’s The Capulets and Montagues, drawing on the whole of the University’s student body, will be performed in August as part of the fringe programme of the RSC’s Complete Works Festival and will offer practical experience for actors, technicians, and directors.

The CAPITAL Centre provides a shared space for academics, teachers and students and practitioners, writers and actors to inform each other’s work. Michael Boyd’s vision as Artistic Director of the RSC involves a particular emphasis on the model of the RSC community as a ‘campus’ where research and learning are integral to the process of making theatre. Thus the RSC/Warwick Playwright in residence will create new work for the company, University staff are contributing to the RSC’s innovative Artists’ Development Programme and outreach is being achieved jointly through the Learning Network being taken into UK schools by the RSC’s Learning Department.

The English Subject Centre will be one of the main channels for the dissemination of the CAPITAL Centre’s work to the higher education community beginning with a joint conference on the teaching of Shakespeare in September 2006 (for details, see the Events Calendar on p.4 above). We hope to share our experiences of the CAPITAL Centre’s development and progress in this Newsletter.

Teaching Library

Whilst it’s not hard to find books and articles on HE teaching in general, material specific to English can be trickier to track down. The Subject Centre has therefore devoted part of its website (http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/teachlib/index.php) to a concise bibliography of work on teaching and learning which has particular relevance to English Studies. Our round-up is far from complete and we welcome your suggestions for additions.
‘Thoroughly comprehensive and pretty valuable’, ‘interesting rather than immediately useful’, ‘productive and entertaining’ were some of the ways in which the Warwick University students described their experience of The Canterbury Tales Study Day which took place at the beginning of their Spring Term. The event was one of the first to take place under the auspices of the CAPITAL Centre, bringing together resources provided by the Royal Shakespeare Company with the teaching and learning process at Warwick University. The study day coincided with the Stratford run of the RSC touring production of The Canterbury Tales, adapted by Mike Poulton and directed by three directors, with Gregory Doran at the helm. The play, very unusually, included all of Chaucer’s tales and was staged in two full evening performances.

Although primarily envisaged as a means of enhancing the learning process of second-year English Literature students taking a 30-credit Chaucer module, the study day was deliberately conceived in such a way that it could provide multiple entry points for a combination of students. The fact that the project involved a contemporary writer/adaptor made it relevant to a group of second-year Creative Writing students. We also capitalised on the popular appeal of the production by involving a group of first-year students on a compulsory Medieval to Renaissance Literature module which included Chaucer.

The day had a three-part structure. The first contextual session involved a series of 20-minute introductions from Dr Sue Niebrzydowski, lecturer in Medieval Literature at Warwick, the writer Mike Poulton and assistant director Donnacadh O’Brìain. After lunch the students divided into two groups, having previously signed up for a practical session of their choice. Mike Poulton and a group of actors worked with their student group on adaptation techniques – which included reading and commenting on samples of students’ work; while Donnacadh O’Brìain and myself worked with the second group on textual interpretation, utilising rehearsal techniques in the students’ reading of a chosen tale. Interestingly the students’ choices of a practical session were not necessarily predictable – some of the Creative Writing students chose to attend the director’s session and vice versa. Notably however, Sue Niebrzydowski also chose to participate in the session dealing with practical approaches to text alongside some of her own students. The final session of the day was a simple Q&A session involving members of the creative team as well as the actors Mike Hadfield who played Chaucer, Paula Dionisotti (the Prioress) and Nick Barber (the Young Squire). The various perspectives on both the original text and the current production facilitated a lively discussion.

While interdisciplinarity carries its own appeal as an idea – offering opportunities for cross-fertilisation, broadening of horizons and diversification of the existing learning models – in practice, it repeatedly proves to be problematic. Possible advantages can often easily be seen as disadvantages too. While a lot of the students on this occasion expressed appreciation and enthusiasm at being given an opportunity to ‘learn from the RSC professionals’, one respondent highlighted the benefit of having had an academic perspective on the text while another complained of the ‘one-sided’ nature of the event (referring to the evident RSC bias to the day as a whole). Additionally, a second year English Literature student thought the day would have been more useful to a drama student while a creative writing student found he benefited from the day ‘more as an academic than as a writer’. Some complained the day was too structured, others wished they had been made to go and see the play beforehand.

First years tended to have had the most open-minded, enthusiastic and appreciative responses to the day’s content and structure. The tutor for the Chaucer module, Dr Niebrzydowski, wrote that she found the event ‘very useful’, outlining five very precise seminar tasks and issues she was able to structure into the course as a result of her students’ attendance of the theatre trips and the study day. She also mentioned the possibility of ‘building in of a performance related question into the assessment that can be adapted in future years to take into account the BBC Chaucer Tales and the animated version’. As far as our own learning outcomes are concerned, this event has highlighted the following: unless they are in their first year and inherently open to a variety of teaching approaches, students need to see a direct correlation between the educational event they are attending and their own course objectives and existing learning styles and...
requirements. In order to have the desired educational impact, any additional educational event should be built into the course structure and linked to the assessment strategies. The role and input of the course leader in the conception of such an educational event is paramount.

It is worth noting that the attitudes of students in HE are changing radically – at a £3,000 pounds a go, they can no longer be expected to champion the idea of experimentation and innovation in the process of teaching and learning – they have been made customers and they want their goods in an immaculate condition.

At HE level, one of the primary purposes of the learning process has traditionally been to hone the students’ critical skills and encourage and nurture freedom and originality of thought. While the core purpose of the CAPITAL Centre is to break down boundaries between critical theory and creative practice, this event highlighted for us that our enterprise will work only if it is made to be directly ‘useful’ to the students themselves, and that, for the time being, our most important mission is to enable academic staff to create and deliver interesting and valuable work.

Money for E-learning Advocates

Looking for new ways to ‘embed’ e-learning in your department? This exciting new initiative could be the answer. An award from the JISC means that the English Subject Centre will shortly be able to fund the work of a limited number of e-learning ‘advocates’ (existing members of English departments who encourage and support the adoption of e-learning). The money will be available for one year between September 2006 and August 2007. Departments are invited to bid for up to £8,000 (inclusive of VAT) to cover at least one day a week’s work by a named advocate working in the English disciplines (literature, language or creative writing). The deadline for applications is 5 June 2006. Details of how to bid are on the Subject Centre website at http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/technology/advocates.php?event_index=95.
Teaching Children’s Fiction

Pam Knights (pam.knights@durham.ac.uk), Lecturer in English at the University of Durham, reports on an event held at Durham on 24 May 2005, sponsored by the English Subject Centre in association with her NTFS-funded project TRAC (Textual Reflection: from Adult to Child).

Children’s Literature has a long established history in UK HE (the Reading University MA has just celebrated its twentieth anniversary); new modules and programmes are burgeoning; and the area has also become a focus for a range of funded projects (from AHRC to FDTL5 and National Teaching Fellowships). The object of this day was to bring together some colleagues currently teaching children’s literature modules within university English departments, in order to compare experiences and explore some of the subject’s problems and possibilities in our day-to-day teaching practices. Towards the end of the teaching year, with closing seminars and final assignments in prospect, and module questionnaires fresh from the scanner, seemed a good time for such reflections. As a single-day event based in the far North East, it was envisaged as a small-scale, regional workshop, which would consolidate and build on existing networks; but it attracted inquiries from all over the country, and was attended by colleagues from a variety of departments, including Media and Cultural Studies and Education. Our emphasis was on methodology (teaching and assessment) rather than on the curriculum (still often in the foreground even in discussions that purport to be interested in pedagogy). We attempted in the planning to have short introductory ‘inputs’ rather than formal papers, and to leave ample (though, as it turned out, not enough) space throughout the day for participants to exchange ideas and talk.

The day opened with broader perspectives: David Rudd (Bolton) and Kay Sambell (Northumbria) launched discussion of, respectively, the teacher’s and students’ perspectives. Do our modules make particular kinds of demands on students and teachers; does working with the subject open up different inquiries from all over the country, and was attended by colleagues from a variety of departments, including Media and Cultural Studies and Education. Our emphasis was on methodology (teaching and assessment) rather than on the curriculum (still often in the foreground even in discussions that purport to be interested in pedagogy). We attempted in the planning to have short introductory ‘inputs’ rather than formal papers, and to leave ample (though, as it turned out, not enough) space throughout the day for participants to exchange ideas and talk.

The day opened with broader perspectives: David Rudd (Bolton) and Kay Sambell (Northumbria) launched discussion of, respectively, the teacher’s and students’ perspectives. Do our modules make particular kinds of demands on students and teachers; does working with the subject open up different approaches to teaching and learning from those conventionally associated with the literary canon; how do we work with a module and a genre (if ‘children’s literature’ is a genre) which is a meeting-point for students from different disciplines/areas of the subject? Referring to Susan Gannon’s ‘informational ecosystem’ model, David set out some of its navigational challenges – where we tread (possibly crushing students’ treasured memories as we go); how we map its multidisciplinary knowledges. How do we map the subject! David’s list made plain the scale of the task:

- Literature, literary concepts
- History of art, visual literacy
- Popular culture (toys, fashions, films, comics, TV, clothes, etc.)
- Children’s popular culture (playground rhymes, games, chants, jokes, slang)
- Gender and women’s studies
- Post-colonial theory, race issues
- Queer theory
- Cultural and film studies
- Bibliography, history of printing and reproduction, of publishing and marketing
- History of childhood
- Psychology
- Having once been a child.

A further list, of ways the subject disrupts and blurs (or, in David’s analogy, ‘queers’) binaries and boundaries celebrated its opportunities – what we can explore; how far we can go. Teaching children’s literature ‘plays’ within and across categories – in David’s examples:

- Canon, literature
- Child (girl, boy, teenager, adolescent) v. adult
- High v low /popular culture
- Realism v fantasy
- Reading
- Literature + other media (comics, chapbooks, rhymes, jokes, sayings, TV/video/computer games, films, media stories, figures, children’s writing) = Postmodernism

Kay took up the learners’ perspective, in interviews conducted as part of the FDTL5 MEDAL project (Making a Difference: Educational Development to Enhance Academic Literacy). In comments such as these, students, it seems, are excited as well as daunted by such scope –

‘It does help with other subjects as well, because you learn to research properly, instead of just picking up a reading list and going “Right! I’ll pick five off that.”'
‘It really does help you to learn how to use the library and online resources a lot more – definitely. When I’m doing something, say, for Victorians, I just go to the Victorian section and sort of pick the whole shelf of Dickens, and I can then take it home with me. Not with this.’

Teachers’ views of the possibilities for ‘alternative’ classroom approaches also found mirrors in the students’ experiences of learning. From Kay’s interviews again, we heard students celebrating their modules, for method as well as content:

‘It’s brilliant! The best module I’ve done! Because it’s different – the emphasis is completely different, the way it is taught is completely different’;

‘This is much more hands on and interactive and a better way of learning than seminars that are just big discussions. If you learn like that you are really getting involved with the text, rather than sitting there and not really paying attention.’

After this reassurance, our next session, ‘Border Crossings’, sustained the theme of ‘opening up’ our subject, in all kinds of ‘cross-overs’, within and outside the specialised university module. Inter- and multi-disciplinarity and the ‘place’ of the subject in non-specialist modules was again a main focus in discussion introduced by Matthew Grenby (Newcastle). How do we teach groups with mixed experience/academic backgrounds; or those who have little previous knowledge of literature/literary theory; do we offer mini-lectures on, say, sociology, or history, in the course of our sessions on literary texts? And what happens if we take our teaching outside academia, into encounters with ‘real children’? Rachel Falconer’s (Sheffield) account of teaching ‘Kiddult Fiction’, and of her experimental school-based ‘Kiddult’ project, generated fresh debate about how to acknowledge the diverse paradigms of the subject, how to theorise the text/audience relation, and how to find practical modes of addressing all this within larger curricular and institutional constraints. (With a number of projects represented among the group – including National Teaching Fellowship scheme, ‘MEDAL’ and ‘Hockliffe’, the problems and opportunities of teaching within a project frame became a recurring strand of the day.)

In the afternoon, we moved into the minutiae of our individual day-to-day practices: in ‘Ways and Means: What do we actually do in our classrooms?’ Mel Gibson (Northumbia and MEDAL) and Pam Knights (Durham, NTFS ‘TRAC’, and MEDAL) demonstrated some of the ‘hands on’ tasks through which they (respectively) encourage students to conceptualise childhood spaces, and to engage with textual detail (also, in Pam’s TRAC project, in workshops with children). Then all participants shared some of their own ideas, resources, syllabi, schemes of work, in small-group swap-shops. Over-ambitiously, given the timing, we tried to bring the day together in a final session, asking how, in the end, we assess all this. Individuals had submitted sample assignment and essay tasks in advance, providing rich material for discussion. Many participants again registered problems about how to acknowledge often unfamiliar angles of approach, or innovative forms of pedagogy and assessment, within standard departmental frames. Any one of the day’s topics could have expanded to become an event in its own right, but we felt that this final session, on innovation and assessment, would particularly benefit from being offered as the focus for a further, specialised event.

The day, though crowded, was very productive. As one participant commented: ‘It involved people from all walks of “academic” children’s literature and allowed a sharing of interests while indicating the various distinctions between us, based on academic background and location.’ We all made fresh networks, and discovered more about the work, even of colleagues we already knew. Where a teacher was working in isolation, finding out about other’s modules was especially reaffirming. (Comments included: ‘I enjoyed meeting new people and also came out with a greater sense of reassurance that my proposed new module won’t be the unfocused disaster I had once feared it would be!’ / ‘I sometimes feel like the voice in the wilderness here so it was great to meet with like-minded people at an event such as that.’)

If any colleague is wondering whether to organise a similar day, our experience suggests that it is well worth the effort. (And for colleagues for whom a day-trip to Durham was impossible, an event located further south would clearly be much appreciated.) Opening up an individual interest in this way can prove hugely rewarding – and much more energising than sitting alone with a pile of student evaluations.
The English Subject Centre’s student essay competition, run earlier this year, was a great success. We were impressed by the number and quality of essays on the set topic of How does your experience of your course compare with any expectations you may have had? and, together with the external assessor, we found that reading the essays gave us valuable insights into the student experience of English and the personal sacrifices, tribulations and joys of studying in higher education.

The winner, Rachel Davies, an Open University student, has received a cheque for £250 and will go forward to a national competition with entries from other Higher Education Academy Subject Centres. The competition is going to be established as an annual event, so we look forward to an even better response next year. The winning entry and runner-up will be published in the next issue of this Newsletter and we will publish all entries in whole or in part on our website shortly.

Writing Matters

Writing Matters, a major report on student writing in UK HE, has just been published by the Royal Literary Fund. Edited by Stevie Davies, David Swinburne and Gweno Williams, the report identifies serious problems in student writing and suggests some possible solutions. The report is based on the experiences of Royal Literary Fund Fellows, professional writers who have worked with undergraduates on their writing skills. The report is available at: http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowship-scheme/research.cfm. For information about the report and about the Fellowship Scheme, please contact:

The Fellowship Officer,
The Royal Literary Fund,
3 Johnson’s Court,
London. EC4A 3EA.
Email: rlfund@btconnect.com
Teaching Scottish and Irish Literature

Murray Pittock reports on a day held in Manchester on 21 October 2005.

The English Subject Centre’s decision to hold a study day dedicated to Scottish and Irish literature is a tribute to the increasing visibility of Scottish and Irish Studies within the discipline of ‘English’. The day was hosted by Murray Pittock, Professor of Scottish and Romantic Literature at the University of Manchester, and was attended by 25 delegates, most of whom were based furth of Scotland and Ireland. Dr Jonathan Gibson attended from the Subject Centre.

The morning session opened with Dr Liam Harte (Manchester) discussing Irish Studies as ‘a transgressive and a founding site for postcolonial theory’ and commenting on the importance of identifying student background and context, while Dr Crawford Gribben (Manchester) discussed his experiences in delivering Scottish literature both at Trinity College, Dublin and in Northern Ireland and Professor Glenda Norquay (John Moores) outlined curricular issues in the contemporary Scottish and Irish film and poetry courses at JMU. Dr John Corbett (Glasgow) gave a display of Moodle, Glasgow’s preferred Virtual Learning Environment, and demonstrated its potential in linking Scottish Studies internationally, while Dr Barbara Bell (Edge Hill) outlined the problem-based assessment tool she used to encourage theatre students to address the difficulties inherent in staging plays from Scottish or Irish literature in different kinds of theatrical and cultural environments.

In the afternoon, Dr Bill Hutchings (Manchester) expanded on the problem and enquiry-based learning theme by discussing ways to teach Swift using contemporary iconography, a theme taken up later in a Scottish context by Dr Suzanne Gilbert (Stirling). Professor Alan Riach (Glasgow) analysed his experiences in teaching both Scottish and Irish literature (and encounters with expatriate culture) in New Zealand, ending with a poem, as did Mr John McAuliffe (Manchester) who examined the issues in teaching creative writing through the medium of national literatures. Dr Michael Brown (Trinity College, Dublin) and Dr Gerry Carruthers (Glasgow) both took on the broader theoretical issues of revisionism in Scottish and Irish Studies in a day packed with everything from teaching techniques to new research ideas. The October day was a tribute, at a busy time in term, to the enthusiasm for Scottish literature now increasingly evident throughout these islands, not least at the University of Manchester, where it is now embedded in year 2, 3 and MA programmes.

Keep up to date with the Subject Centre

As well as this free twice-yearly Newsletter, the English Subject Centre now also produces a regular eBulletin containing brief updates on our activities. This new publication replaces the old paper-based Bulletin. If you would like to receive a copy, please join our main electronic mailing list at http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/communicate/contact/mailinglist.php. You can use the same link to join our print mailing list, which is used to distribute the Newsletter and to circulate information about events. Details of other Subject Centre publications can be found at http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/index.php.

We now also have a webpage designed to keep you up to date with our work in progress (http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/progress/index.php).
The object of this event was to explore pedagogic issues arising from the training of postgraduate students within and beyond MA research training modules. For both funding and cultural reasons, matters to do with research students are commonly bracketed under ‘research’. This symposium took as its starting place the idea that the training of postgraduate students is at one and the same time a matter of pedagogy – that MA curriculum, assessment, and teaching methods are as worthy of developmental and critical attention as are those experienced by undergraduates, and that transition, preparedness, and retention are equally pressing concerns. Since research training is also the gateway to the profession, the experience of postgraduate students has an intimate bearing on the future shape of the subject.

The day was lightly structured so as to enable dialogue and exchange of experience between colleagues from different institutions. Fourteen colleagues, representing eleven different institutions, took part. Participants were encouraged to think holistically about the responsibilities of departments and postgraduate tutors towards students, towards scholarship, and towards the future of the discipline.

Participants were asked to come prepared to speak about the primary issues in their own department, for example:

- Why are postgraduates important to your department?
- What kind of training do you offer postgraduates?
- How do you see postgraduates featuring in your department?
- What are the trends in postgraduate admissions?

During the course of the day participants were invited to reflect on the responsibilities of programmes towards students, scholarship, and the future of the discipline.

Dr Ashley Tauchert (Exeter) had been asked to present a focus to open the discussion. Her presentation launched a number of recurrent themes. Much of her presentation concerned the speed of transition into postgraduate programmes. Deadlines were harsh, and there was little time to induct students who arrived from a variety of courses and backgrounds. Postgraduate students were a diverse body, and their transition needs were not usually given as much attention as those of undergraduates. At the same time there was a growing gap between departments’ expectations and the actual mix of skills and knowledge brought by students entering programmes. Injecting research competence was more of a problem with taught MA students than with those destined for research programmes. Dr Tauchert saw the struggle of students in cultural transition as opening up fundamental questions about the nature of the discipline. Thus for example many overseas students – themselves inclined to celebrate cultural tradition – were distressed and disorientated by the combative nature of British English studies. A culture gap yawned where staff tended to want to undo all that had been done in the name of English Studies, and expected students to write like themselves.

A further set of questions which flowed on through the day concerned the tension between breadth and research specialisation. If we sought a healthy research culture, what were we to make of specialisation – or of those students who wanted to study ‘English’ rather than a specialism? Broad interests tend not to attract funding, so are not ‘owned’ as are sub-fields. All this led some to a dystopian fantasy that English would fragment as increasingly postgraduates were sucked into the discourse of the academic career. What happened to those (some of them mature students) who were seeking a broad education and had no ambitions for professional scholarship? Many of the most academically able undergraduates, it was claimed, did not seek to go into postgraduate work, perhaps no longer seeing this as a space for building on their first degree in any but a professional sense. If we were not to breed up a self-perpetuating elite we had to become better at communicating the benefits of postgraduate work and perhaps find ways of celebrating more appreciative forms of study. Thus in the MA should we seek to keep English people together, or siphon off specialists? We also had to bear in mind the workload implications of running different simultaneous MA schemes, even though colleagues generally welcomed the opportunity to work on them.

It was also felt that we owed it to those who did have their eyes on an academic career to raise their awareness of what is involved in a contemporary academic job. While avoiding ‘spoonfeeding’, there is a need to explain the RAE, the dual support system, etc. All the while, participants felt, there was a tension between the pressure to offer students training and the need to help them become inde-
ependent. Yet arguably professionalization could be seen as playing a part in levelling access, even though a lot of the time it meant HEIs were re-inventing the wheel in terms of PDP, competencies, and training needs. Some training can be done at a generic, faculty level, but many research tasks require the use of very specific tools. 'Training' does not in fact have to be equated with standardisation. An interesting example was cited of a weekly seminar for all postgraduates addressed by specialists who gave insight into the demands and methodologies of their particular area.

At the end it was recognised that utilitarian pressures were coming from students too. English had to get the message through about the value of postgraduate study and the employability of those with higher qualifications. One closing suggestion was that the Subject Centre place on its website a document identifying postgraduate attributes. This would not be intended as a benchmark, but as a resource for departments to customise according to their needs.

Watch a day in the life of an English Student

What do school-leavers applying to do English degrees think life in an English department will be like? A new Subject Centre DVD, 'But what do you do all day?', follows a day in the life of a 'typical' first year English student, with the aim of demystifying the HE experience for potential students. The DVD was produced by a project led by Ceri Sullivan (University of Wales at Bangor). If you would like a copy, please email esc@rhul.ac.uk. Alternatively, you can view video clips on the project webpage (http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/recruit/recruit1.php).
The JISC Strikes Back

What it is the JISC? No, it’s not a sci-fi monster – though it is big and complex and has many arms. ‘JISC’ is the acronym for the oddly-named ‘Joint Information Services Committee’, a body funded by the FE and HE funding councils to help develop the use of new technology (ICT) in tertiary education. The JISC’s activities, directed by a committee system, range far and wide. Some are listed below:

**JISC Collections**
The JISC has funded deals with a number of electronic resource publishers, allowing FE and HE to benefit from more attractive pricing of, and sometimes free access to, otherwise very expensive sources of information. Arts and Humanities resources are listed at [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=coll_subject_a](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=coll_subject_a) and include Early English Books Online (EEBO), Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO), Literature Online (LION) and the Gale Shakespeare Collection.

**The AHDS** ([http://www.ahds.ac.uk](http://www.ahds.ac.uk))
With the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council ([http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/))), the JISC funds the AHDS (Arts and Humanities Data Service), a service providing support for the discovery, creation and preservation of digital resources in arts and humanities research and teaching. There are five AHDS centres. The centre for Literature, Languages and Linguistics is based at Oxford and will be the subject of an article by James Cummings in the next issue of this newsletter.

**JISC Regional Support Centres (RSCs)**
The RSCs provide advice on how to integrate ICT and e-learning into FE and HE, running regionally-based events and visiting individual institutions. For more detail see issue 7 of this newsletter, p. 39 and [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=rsc_home#location](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=rsc_home#location).

**JISCmail** ([http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/](http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/))
A free mailing list service, enabling UK academics to set up and participate in email and web-based lists on topics of their choice.

**JISC Legal Information Service** ([http://www.jisclegal.ac.uk/](http://www.jisclegal.ac.uk/))
A free information service for HE and FE, offering advice about legal topics relating to ICT.

**JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service** ([http://www.jiscpas.ac.uk/](http://www.jiscpas.ac.uk/))
Including access to TurnitinUK, advanced plagiarism detection software.

**Techdis** ([http://www.techdis.ac.uk/](http://www.techdis.ac.uk/))
A service providing support for and advice on the use of ICT to help disabled students and staff, with a very rich set of resources on its website.

**RDN (Resource Discovery Network)** ([http://www.rdn.ac.uk/](http://www.rdn.ac.uk/))
A subject-based service which selects and catalogues Internet resources for FE and HE. The RDN is currently being restructured. Arts and Humanities coverage will be provided by ‘Intute: Arts and Humanities’, which will be launched in July 2006.

**TASI** ([http://www.tasi.ac.uk/](http://www.tasi.ac.uk/))
Guidance on digitisation and the use of digital images in HE and FE.

The JISC also funds projects ([http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=funding](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=funding)) and publishes very useful reports and briefing papers on its website and in hard copy. To find out about more about all these activities, and to get a fuller picture of everything the JISC does, go to [http://www.jisc.ac.uk](http://www.jisc.ac.uk).
Feeling Competitive?  
**E-Tutor of the Year 2006**

Individually or as part of a team, are you using e-learning or blended learning in a novel way to improve your students’ learning experience? Does e-learning play an important part of your curriculum design? Are you being innovative in your use of e-tutoring and ICT to support your teaching? If so, then you can apply to the Higher Education Academy e-Tutor of the Year 2006 competition e-Tutoring strand.

If you or your team are developing e-learning tools (or exploiting underlying services) in a novel way to improve student learning or exploring a novel application of an existing technology or service in the context of student learning in Higher Education, then you can enter the e-Tool strand.

Now in its fourth year the e-Tutor of the year competition, sponsored by the *Times Higher*, the Higher Education Academy and ALTC (The Association of Learning Technology) is pleased to offer two first prizes:

- £1,000 from the *Times Higher Education Supplement* – for the e-Tutoring strand
- A Tablet PC from Toshiba – for the e-Tool strand

More details and entry forms can be found on the Higher Education Academy website: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/etutor.htm](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/etutor.htm). The deadline for receipt of entries is 9 June 2006.

Learning on Screen Awards

The BUFVC (British Universities Film and Video Council) Learning on Screen Awards celebrate and reward excellence in the production of effective learning material which employs moving image, sound and graphics. The scheme is open to new content produced for broadcast, for online delivery or for distribution on physical media – CD, DVD or videocassette. The three main categories for entries are: General Education, Course and Curriculum-Related Content and Student Production. [http://www.bufvc.ac.uk/conferences/learningonscreen/](http://www.bufvc.ac.uk/conferences/learningonscreen/).

New Resources

**Launch of the JORUM service**

JORUM is a free national collection of learning materials that is now live and available to all UK further and higher education institutions. The service is brand new and a key focus is to build a ‘community for sharing’. As a Jorum user you are able to search, browse, preview, download, review, reuse and repurpose the learning materials within it. To take advantage of the materials on offer, your institution or project must register at [http://www.jorum.ac.uk/](http://www.jorum.ac.uk/).

A training and outreach tour promoting the new service has also been organised over the summer of 2006. I would strongly advise interested academics to register for one of these free events. See [http://www.jorum.ac.uk/news/tour.php](http://www.jorum.ac.uk/news/tour.php).

**BECTA technology resources**

The BECTA (British Educational Communications and Technology Agency) website contains a wealth of information on the use of ICT in the primary and secondary sector, much of which can be extremely useful in HE contexts as well. The technology section in particular provides fact sheets, tips and examples of a range of technologies in educational contexts. See [http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=te](http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=te).

**JISC exemplars of Online Resources for Further Education**

JISC (see p. 47 above) has commissioned a series of five ‘exemplars’ which demonstrate how FE practitioners can use content found in online resources to support their teaching. The exemplars are available on CD-ROM or online from an ‘ac.uk’ domain and whilst addressing an FE audience they provide some excellent examples of how digital archives can be exploited to create engaging learning materials for students. See [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=exemplars](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=exemplars) and [http://restricted.jisc.ac.uk/exemplars_fe/](http://restricted.jisc.ac.uk/exemplars_fe/).
**60 Second Shakespeare**
The BBC have set the challenge to UK schools of creating their own 60 second interpretation of Shakespeare using film or audio. Read about the project and view the growing archive of 60 second performances on the BBC website. http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/shakespeare/60secondshakespeare/index.shtml.

**New Tools**

**Thumbstacks.com**
Is an example of a new kind of web-based service dedicated to design, delivery and sharing of presentations all done through your web browser – no need for a proprietary software programme. All you do is send your colleagues a web link! It’s very new but definitely worth a look. See http://www.thumbstacks.com/.

**Writeboards**
Writeboards are sharable web-based text documents that let you save every edit, roll back to any version, and easily compare changes. Unlike a Word document that’s stored at your office on one computer, you can get to your writeboards from any computer in the world with an internet connection and a modern web browser. If you are involved in any form of collaborative writing – and let’s face it who isn’t these days? – then check out this innovative new online service, which again is free. See http://www.writeboard.com/.

**New Publications**
Some recommendations for your bookshelf:

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](http://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.

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The English Subject Centre Newsletter is produced twice a year and distributed widely through all institutions teaching English in Higher Education.

The newsletter’s aims are:

• to provide information about resources, developments and innovations in teaching
• to provide a discursive or reflective forum for teaching and learning issues
• to evaluate existing and new teaching materials, textbooks and IT packages

We welcome contributions. Articles range from 300–3000 words in length.

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