Discipline and Flourish: an interview with Carla Sassi
Nicole King

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Brett Lucas

Leitch, Skills and Prosperity for All: towards a humanities perspective
Ben Knights

Orb: a student-led virtual creative writing magazine
Jennifer M Young

Critical Responsive Understanding
Graeme Harper
This newsletter is published twice a year by the English Subject Centre, part of the Subject Network of the Higher Education Academy. The English Subject Centre provides many different kinds of help to English lecturers – more details are available in this Newsletter and on our website (www.english.heacademy.ac.uk). At the heart of all our work is the view that the higher education teaching of English is best supported from within the discipline itself.

As well as updates on the English Subject Centre’s activities and important developments (both within the discipline and across higher education), you will find articles here on a wide range of English-related topics. The next issue of the Newsletter will appear in spring 2009. We welcome contributions. If you would like to submit an article (of between 300 and 2,500 words), propose a book or software review (perhaps a textbook review by one of your students) or respond in a letter to someone else’s article, please contact the editor, Nicole King (nicole.king@rhul.ac.uk) or visit our Newsletter web page at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/newsletter/index.php

In the meantime, you can keep in touch with our activities by subscribing to our e-mail list at www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/english–heacademy.html. The Newsletter is distributed to English departments throughout the UK and is available online at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/index.php, along with previous issues. If you would like extra copies, please e-mail us at esc@rhul.ac.uk.

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Welcome
Nicole King

October. Hopefully you have taken a few weeks holiday and, if you’re lucky, have had time to devote to your research. Your course handbooks and module outlines are complete and ready. Your campuses are gearing up or are already humming with activity. Inevitably a new building is under construction somewhere within earshot of your office space and, at charitable moments, you see this as an appropriate metaphor for the start of fall term: growth, expansion, change. We hope Issue 15 will contribute to that sense of promise and new beginnings.

In keeping with the theme of fresh starts, we’ve made a few changes to the Newsletter, which we think will make it easier and more enjoyable to read. Brett Lucas’s popular column on internet and digital technologies, ‘IT Works’, now anchors the Starters section in the front of the issue, just after the Events Calendar. Sharing the middle sections are Features and Creative Pedagogies. In this issue our Features section is packed: in the Interview we’ve been talking to Scottish literature specialist Carla Sassi, about her teaching career and the surprising differences between higher education in Italy and the UK. Our other articles include Joan Anim-Addo and Les Back’s impassioned discussion of why Black British literature isn’t regularly taught in UK departments of English. Our director, Ben Knights, confronts how English might, if not must join with the other Humanities subjects to think and plan strategically about how skills, economics and employability can sympathetically map onto our group of subjects. Brett Lucas reports on the successful way for lecturers to learn from and with one another regarding e-learning using strategies developed by colleagues across the UK over the last two years. In Creative Pedagogies we have published Nicola Harlow’s winning essay from our annual student competition; she reveals What Makes a Good Lecturer. Graeme Harper writes about his research into how Creative Writing students learn while Jennifer M Young transports us into Second Life, where she and her students have created a virtual literary magazine. In this issue we are also pleased to include reports from Candice Satchwell on higher education in further education and from Keith Hughes on specific higher education initiatives in Scotland. Finally, the Endnotes section gathers together Book Reviews, Desert Island Texts and The Last Word.

Also scattered throughout this issue are summaries of our current mini-projects and highlights of some of the events we’ve run or helped you to run since April. If you would like more details about this year’s projects (or those of previous cycles) please go to the Projects page on our website. And, if you would like comprehensive reports of any of our events just navigate to the Event archive also on our website. We hope to offer more mini-project funding in 2009 – watch this space and our home page for a funding announcement. Please get in touch if you have a suggestion for an event or are interested in involving the English Subject Centre in an event you have already planned. We are also happy to sponsor teaching-related strands or panels at research conferences.

If you are looking for the through line to this issue it won’t take you long to notice the emphasis has fallen in three places: early career teaching, Creative Writing and Humanism. Our interview with Carla Sassi and Suzanne Hobson’s The Last Word, each address the complex transition from postgraduate studies into full-time employment as a lecturer. While Sassi remembers clearly when she ceased to be a ‘new’ lecturer, Hobson is more ambivalent about the distinction between ‘new’ and ‘experienced’ especially as greater numbers of postgraduate students are doing more and more teaching. Please consider sharing these articles with your own postgraduate students and any colleague you have who is just starting out. The latter group may also be interested in our New Lecturers’ Workshop in November (see p.44). The continued rise of Creative Writing is certainly reflected in this issue: you can read about projects, events and pedagogical innovations being pursued with great success by Creative Writing practitioners. Our student essay is written from the perspective of Creative Writing and both book reviews in this issue consider Creative Writing texts. But whether in a workshop or a lecture theatre, whatever your area of teaching is, many of the contributors to this issue, including Anim-Addo, Back, Knights, Lucas and Sassi, are quite animated about the role humanism has played and will continue to play in the development of our group of subjects. Though these writers each have very different points to make, from distinct perspectives, they agree that we must not lose sight of the intrinsic plurality and diversity of humanistic pursuits taken up under the banner of literature, language and Creative Writing. Read on, enjoy and please, send us your comments.

Nicole King
Editor

Recycle
when you have finished with this publication please pass it on to a colleague or student or recycle it appropriately.
Events Calendar
Autumn 2008/Spring 2009

For further details about any of these mainly free events please visit our website
www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/events

EVENT: Beyond the Placement: Creative Writing and Employability
DATE: 23 October 2008
LOCATION: Bath Spa University

Employability and Creative Writing may appear unlikely bedfellows, but increasing student and parental expectations fuelled by the costs of university study and the 'J.K. Rowling factor' make employability a very real issue for universities delivering Creative Writing programmes. This one-day workshop organised in collaboration with the NAWE HE Committee and ArtsWork, Bath Spa University’s Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in the creative industries, is for staff involved in or responsible for weaving employability into their Creative Writing programme or individual module.

EVENT: Teaching Milton and His Time
DATE: 7 November 2008
LOCATION: University of Manchester

In partnership with institutions such as Chetham’s Library, John Rylands Library and the MIMAS service, this one-day conference will examine new pedagogies and new technologies for the teaching of John Milton and his time. Sessions will address interdisciplinary teaching, the problems and challenges associated with making Milton relevant, new teaching styles such as Enquiry Based learning, the impact of information technologies and web 2.0 practices upon pedagogy and teaching textual and material culture in partnership with libraries and archives.

EVENT: New Lecturers’ Workshop
DATE: 21–23 November 2008
LOCATION: Nottingham

Are you in your first full-time post? Do you teach literature, Creative Writing or language courses? Would you like to discuss and develop your teaching with your peers in English studies? If the answer is yes to these questions, register now for the annual New Lecturers’ Workshop. This three-day, two-night event (subsidised cost: £130), promises lively debate and dialogue on teaching, space to reflect on and develop your teaching practice, structured sessions on topics such as: close reading, assessment, and lecture and seminar teaching alongside input from English Subject Centre staff and invited guests on pedagogy and research.

EVENT: Beyond the Essay? Assessment in English Literature and Creative Writing
DATE: 5 December 2008
LOCATION: Northumbria University, Newcastle

Assessment is crucial. No other aspect of pedagogic practice has such power to enhance or to limit student learning. This major two-day conference, organised jointly by the English Subject Centre and the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Assessment for Learning at Northumbria University, will provide an exciting opportunity for lecturers in English literature and Creative Writing to reflect critically on current assessment methods, to present case studies of innovative forms of assessment and to raise fundamental questions about why we assess students, how we assess them and in what ways assessment might be driving teaching and learning within the discipline.

EVENT: Reading, Writing and Reflecting: A Workshop For Not-So-New Lecturers
DATE: 6–7 March 2009
LOCATION: London

This residential workshop is offered to all those colleagues who have attended the English Subject Centre’s annual ‘New Lecturer’ conference held in Birmingham or Nottingham. (There is no fee, but participants are requested to make their own arrangements for accommodation over Friday night.) This event offers the opportunity to step back briefly from the day-to-day rush in order to reflect upon your subsequent experience of teaching and academic life. We are not aiming to provide off-the-shelf teaching solutions. Rather, the event is based on the idea that to be an effective teacher and an engaged academic citizen requires us to be in touch with the sources of our own learning.

EVENT: Networking Day for Heads of English
DATE: 27 March 2009
LOCATION: Leeds

The English Subject Centre Networking Day for Heads of English is an annual event creating an opportunity for those who lead departments to share ideas, experiences and concerns. The focus is on informal networking and exchange in a relaxed context. We consult with participants in advance about the issues they wish to discuss and arrange the programme accordingly. This event, specifically for those in a Head of Department (or equivalent) role, has been running for several years, and feedback indicates that it is a valued networking opportunity.

EVENT: A Special Relationship? Teaching English with Media Studies
DATE: 24 April 2009
LOCATION: University College Falmouth

This event will provide a space to explore the relationship between the disciplines of English and Media Studies in terms of: programme design and content, teaching methodologies and the place of theory in the syllabus. It is of interest to those who teach on further and higher education programmes which offer any kind of combination of the two subjects. The QAA Benchmarking Statement for English now acknowledges the teaching of literary texts together with other media and ‘cultural forms’, and it explicitly acknowledges Cultural Studies-based programmes as an important sector of English provision. In light of this, it is an important time to review the history of the relationship between English and Media Studies and to think about the future direction of that relationship.
Brett Lucas casts his eye over recent developments in the world of e-learning.

New Resources

**Periodicals Archive Online**
ProQuest and JISC Collections have made a collection of 80 journal titles, taken from ProQuest's *Periodicals Archive Online*, available to universities and colleges in the UK. Researchers, teaching staff and students can have free access to more than 100 years of content and 288,006 articles covering the arts, humanities and social sciences. Titles include *Early American Literature*, *English Literature in Transition – 1880–1920*, *Shakespeare Studies* and *Modern Fiction Studies*. The articles contained in the collection encompass the full backfile of each journal, with content dating from 1891 through 2000.

To gain access to *Periodicals Archive Online*, your institution will need to complete a licence agreement. For further information, please go to [www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/pao](http://www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/pao) or contact your subject librarian.

**BBC Motion Gallery**
If you want a step-up from YouTube or Google Video into the world of professional motion pictures to share with your students, then you might be interested in another major collection being made available through JISC and the BBC Motion Gallery. The collection spans 70 years and contains more than 20,000 clips. The JISC Collections licence for this resource allows staff and students to search for, download, edit and use footage in student assignments and projects, showreels, résumés, competition entries, presentations, course packs, Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) and deposit footage in learning and teaching repositories such as JORUM.

[www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/bbcmotion](http://www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/bbcmotion)

**Cambridge Companions Online**
*Cambridge Companions Online* is the electronic version of the Cambridge Companions series, covering literature, philosophy, classics, religion and cultural studies. Over 270 titles are included, which provide introductions to major writers, artists, philosophers, topics and periods. Specially commissioned essays, which are designed for student readers, enhance and complement the book series.

Subscriptions are available for the complete collection or either of the two sub-collections: a) literature and classics and b) philosophy, religion and culture. You may also upgrade your subscription to include *Shakespeare Survey Online*. This is the online version of *Shakespeare Survey*, a yearbook of Shakespeare studies and production.

[www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/cco](http://www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/cco)

New Books

- *Podcasting for Learning in Universities*  
  by Gilly Salmon and Palitha Edirisingha (eds)  
  Publisher: OUP, 2008

- *Moodle Teaching Techniques: Creative Ways to Use Moodle for Constructing Learning Solutions*  
  by William H. Rice IV  
  Publisher: Packt, 2007
Tools

Bookmark your favourite page on the English Subject Centre website – it’s easy!

Some of you may have noticed the bookmarking and sharing widget that now appears at the bottom of every page on the English Subject Centre website. Mouse over the word ‘Share’ and a drop-down window will reveal a list of many of the most popular social bookmarking tools (eg Del.icio.us, Digg, Technorati, Facebook). Select your favourite tool, add any other info (tags, descriptions etc and the page is saved for you! If you are new to social bookmarking, Google the term and you will find many resources. Educause have a ‘7 things you should know about’ factsheet (go to their 2005 tab).

www.educause.edu/7ThingsYouShouldKnowAboutSeries/7495

SMSPOLL

Ever wanted to run a poll and get the results quickly but haven’t had the time, money or technology to set it up? This web-based system could be the answer. Your audience votes by sending an SMS to a local phone number and the results are updated in real-time, eg in your PowerPoint presentation or on your website. There is a free option that limits your votes to 25/poll, otherwise a range of options are available at reasonable rates.

www.smspoll.net/

vozMe

Why not have a go with this extremely easy to use, free, web-based text-to-speech converter? Simply pull up the vozMe website into your web browser and type or paste text into the box. When you have finished you select ‘create MP3 and your text is converted into a downloadable sound file. There are also a set of widgets on the website that can be inserted into webpages.


Focus On …

MyIntute

As many of you know, Intute is the free, online service providing access to quality, peer-reviewed web resources for use in your classrooms or research, but did you know about the personalised services offered through MyIntute? By creating an account on the website you can save your custom searches, build up your own selection of resources (and their descriptions) to circulate to students or embed in a course web page, tag your resources with your own keywords … or create a ‘reading list’ for your students which is exportable as HTML or Javascript (the latter providing automatic updates). It is also possible to take RSS feeds of relevant resources for your students that you might like to display in your course VLE (current feeds include: English, comparative literature, manuscript studies, communications, media and culture.) Many of these feeds might also be useful on a staff intranet area. Intute-Lite is also an easy way to create an Intute search box for your web pages.

MyIntute www.intute.ac.uk/myintute/index.php
Intute: arts & humanities www.intute.ac.uk/artsandhumanities/

Other Bits and Bobs …

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

• You may need to consult your humanities librarian about access to some of the resources mentioned in this area
• Where possible, I try to recommend software that is open source, free-of-charge, copyright cleared, shareware or freeware
• All URLs on this page were last accessed in July 2008
• You can access all of the links on this page directly in the online version of the Newsletter www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/index.php
Discipline and Flourish: an interview with Carla Sassi

In June, Nicole King spoke with Carla Sassi about teaching, Italian higher education and the lure of Scottish literature.

Carla Sassi began her academic career at the University of Trento, teaching English literature and History of the English language, and she is now an associate professor of literature at the University of Verona. She specialises in Scottish literature and Postcolonial Studies and has lectured and published widely in these fields. Over her career, she has also researched nationalism and literature, modern and contemporary fiction, identity theories and, more recently, law and literature. Her first monograph, Un’arancia Panlinguistica, (1987) is a study of Anthony Burgess’s A Clockwork Orange and its Italian translation. Her other books include Imagined Scotlands (2002), a study on post-Union Scottish literature, Why Scottish Literature Matters (2005), and, as a co-author, Caribbean-Scottish Relations (2007). She has recently co-edited Re-Visioning Scotland: New Readings of the Cultural Canon (2008).

Professor Carla Sassi and I met in Edinburgh last June. The setting was the David Hume tower, overlooking the University of Edinburgh’s campus. Warm and welcoming, Sassi exudes authority and style. As revealed in our interview, she combines genteel formality and discipline with a thoroughly modern approach to her scholarship and teaching. Over the course of the hour we spent together, bursts of laughter, sombre reflection and an admirable candidness all played a part.

We had both just attended the English Subject Centre event ‘Research into Teaching: making the links’ (see p.41). Sassi had been on the programme and she spoke of how, growing up in Italy, her family moved about and, significantly, lived in communities that bordered other countries (Austria and Slovenia). Both the porousness of national borders and the ways in which cultures distinguished themselves influenced the way she came to understand the world, and this in turn fed her professional interests in borderlands.

Sassi’s research periodically brings her to Scotland, and she held a Royal Society of Edinburgh Visiting Research Fellowship in the Department of English Studies at the University of Stirling for six months in 2008. The chance to interview Sassi was a wonderful opportunity for the English Subject Centre to continue to promote the international dimensions of the study of English and, specifically, to explore the teaching of British literature in Europe. As Sassi had made clear at the event earlier in the day, nothing similar to a subject centre network exists in Italy nor is there systematic attention given to teacher training in higher education: ‘There is no such thing, no one will ever teach you how to teach in Italy, not at university level. We do discuss teaching with each other, of course, especially by age groups – so young or younger lecturers would meet and explain or discuss their problems they encounter. But there is no infrastructure. Targeted teaching problems would be discussed, but in a very sort of technical, aseptic way, in faculty meetings.’ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that teaching was not what drew Sassi into a career in academia.

The reluctant lecturer

‘As a university student I said, “I am not interested in teaching, I don’t want to be a teacher,” but, I think after five or six years of working as a lecturer (it was a quite painful process), then I started quite liking it. I think now it helps me to make sense of what I am doing. In the earlier days of my career, I was very much interested in researching, studying and writing, but I was not particularly happy at the idea of teaching (in Italy, it is 100–200 students at a time and it is really demanding, especially when you are inexperienced) ...’ Sassi paused here, clearly thinking back to how she negotiated her relative disinterest in teaching and the imperative to get on
with it. ‘You should try stepping into a class of 200 students for the first time in your life!’ she continued, ‘I was 28 at the time and I mean it was a really frightening experience. I managed quite well in the end but certainly, psychologically, it was very demanding. Because Italian universities do not provide lecturers with any form of training or support, I tried to concentrate on my own experiences as a student. Basically, of course, as a student you know there are teachers who give you a lot and there are teachers who are failures, or just annoy you because they can’t teach properly because they don’t care or don’t prepare their lessons. So I certainly focused on the very good models and the very negative models to know what to do and know what not to do. Then again, I chose to concentrate very much on the students. I rely as much as possible on their response. I am sensitive, so I can see by the way they move and look if they are following, if they are interested, if they are fascinated, if they are terribly bored, and I still do this, after 20 years. Teaching is really based on interaction.’

I asked what shifted after those first painful years as a university lecturer.

‘Age,’ came the response. ‘Because I started at about 28 – I think that is definitely too young – it means that I was very close in age to my students. You need a little bit of distance, and I think the best possible age is probably when you are around 40, because you are distant enough but not too distant. It is, of course, important to be able to identify with them up to a certain extent – to understand what they think, they feel, and gradually I feel I am now becoming more distant, and the more distant you are, the less good the teacher you are going to be. This is what I feel. Experience and age are the factors which are very important.’

The seasoned educator

Sassi was inspired by her own university professors. In them she saw how the two main aspects of our work (research and teaching) coincided. ‘I can think of at least two professors whom I still admire and, unconsciously, I still refer to their integrity, not just their professional way of working. One of them was very strict, very formal, but gentlemanly, absolutely impeccable – just a wonderful teacher as well as an outstanding scholar. I still think of him as the perfect teacher, a model, definitely.’ Her commitment and sense of responsibility to her students is arresting, and reveals itself to be a consistent thread in the warp and weave of her successful career: if she is not teaching her students to the best of her abilities, she is ‘damaging them’ she says. One’s early twenties ‘is an important age in your life, and it is important to have good models.’ Amid the sound and fury of transition, employability, PG certs, benchmarks, assessment regimes, and all the other initiatives that currently dominate UK conversations about higher education, do we sometimes forget about the raw power of example lecturers provide their students? Sassi certainly has not: ‘I feel I have to do my best, even if sometimes I wish I could do something else, rather than step into that class.’ We both laugh at that, each of us recalling the occasions when dread, that pit in the stomach feeling, accompanies one’s entrance into the lecture theatre.

On a more serious note, Sassi adds that the other side of the story, at least in her part of the world, is that she ‘will never make a career out of being a good teacher. It doesn’t matter if you are a good teacher, in the end it’s the publications’. This hard truth resonates in Great Britain as well, I say, where many fear that metrics will usher in a two-tier system of research-only and teaching-only HEIs, while already some colleagues are given negligible amounts of time to effectively conduct research. However, if good teaching is its own reward in Italy, if the intricacies of teaching are not generally the subject of conversation there, and especially as teaching was not, initially, her favourite aspect of the job, how exactly did Sassi motivate herself to get to the top of her game? Surely it would have been easier, and widely acceptable, to try and have a mini-discussion” (‘mini’ because it is impossible to have a proper PowerPoint?! It is just very good for keeping the students attentive, and it just saves a lot of work and is much more efficient. I know they sometimes don’t have the books or forget the books, so I can put a passage on PowerPoint and I’ll say, “Okay, five minutes, read the passage and try and have a mini-discussion” (‘mini’ because it is impossible to have a proper

It is not nice, but our system is based on authority so students don’t question. You don’t debate, you just obey and study and read!
One of the things about our system which I like, I must say, is that it is a generalist system. Whereas here, the Anglo-Saxon system is specialise, specialise, specialise.

Discipline and flourish

In addition to a different cultural attitude towards teaching, there are also significant differences in the way teaching is structured in Italy. For one thing, it is all lectures with no small group teaching at the undergraduate level. Essays are not the standard form of assessment and exams are mainly oral. And when Sassi says she relies on student reactions to her lectures, she means she relies on those students she can see in great big lecture halls, ‘usually the first three to five rows.’ When she asks questions during her lectures, when a brief discussion gets going, it is generated by the students who sit close to the front. ‘In my experience, those who sit there are usually better: very motivated. The farther you go up, god knows what happens in the back rows,’ she chuckles. She makes sure that she gives them one written assignment, described as a ‘questionnaire,’ which helps her to assess what the students are grasping and where she may need to switch approaches.

‘There are disadvantages, but there are advantages,’ Sassi states evenly. ‘If I compare Italian students with British students, or students from other countries where you have written tests and essays, our students are more used to speaking and preparing oral presentations than the others, and I think that is very good. British ERASMUS students at Italian universities are terrified of oral tests, and when they come to me I say, ‘I’ll just ask you a few questions; you read these books and we’ll discuss them,’ and obviously they are not used to this. The fact that there is a bit of improvisation is also good for the student, you don’t really want to spoon feed them.’

At the undergraduate and postgraduate level, the Italian system is based on rigid authority which students are not encouraged to challenge. ‘You don’t debate, you just obey and study and read! Which is a hard discipline, but it is the way I grew up as a student and it means you learn to do things, to study, to find your way, to cope with things you do not like, and this is part of life, you have to do these things when you take a job, when you start as a lecturer, whatever you do in life, basically. The disadvantage of our system is that students are never taught to be fully independent, they are always dependent on their supervisor, or there is always a superior authority who tells them what to do, and I don’t like this.’ Another difference is that gaining the chance to pursue a PhD is incredibly competitive and requires, first of all, that one sit an exam. ‘I warn them,’ says Sassi, ‘that it is a very tough, competitive, ruthless system, and so you have to be prepared.’

There are several major changes afoot in Italian higher education: it has recently switched from four-year to three-year degrees and over to a credit system. Sassi laments the constraints the new structure places on pedagogy: ‘Quality wise, yes I am afraid it is worse, because the creativity has gone and it is just mini-courses to get a smattering of everything,
basically. More or less like everywhere else in Europe, we are all undergoing a process of homogenisation, which is not a bad thing in itself, but it does have its disadvantages. The old system was a crazy system but one which, nonetheless, allowed for extra-curricular or optional activities, such as seminars or guest lectures on specialised topics. Both as a student and as a lecturer in that old system I had splendid opportunities for growing up, exploring, spreading out, it is undoubtedly sad that my students have been deprived of this.’ Sassi balances the loss of creativity in teaching at the undergraduate level with the opportunities for sophisticated intellectual journeys with her postgraduates, with whom she often shares her current research topics.

**Teaching Scottish literature**

From what I’ve read of her work, the idea of exploring and taking risks is an important aspect of Sassi’s acclaimed research on Scottish literature. She came across the subject by chance and found it fascinating, because it was ‘unmapped territory’ and ‘almost unheard of’ in Italy when she started in the 1980s. Initially, she explored the subject largely on her own, including travelling, studying and working in Scotland, and, in her words, ‘built my competence gradually as a “freelance”.

Over several years I got to know and started to collaborate with many fellow Scottish studies specialists, both inside and outside Scotland. But, certainly, I found my way through Scottish literature in a very independent or perhaps personal kind of way, and I have been rewarded for that. Scottish literature is a new, exciting and fascinating field, I think I can claim it with some authority now, leaving a subjective narrative behind … it provides a fresh standpoint from which we can re-vision and problematise many important issues, from the literary canon to British imperialism, and even postcolonialism. In this sense, it is a challenging field of research but also a thought-provoking teaching subject. And I must say that, in the earlier part of my career, it was students who provided the most sensitive gauge to the interest and the relevance of the subject I was devoting myself to … their response was indeed a source of invaluable encouragement and even inspiration.’

There is no Chair of Scottish literature, as yet, in Italy, so Sassi teaches it as part of the ‘English literature’ curriculum. She likes to challenge the stereotypes about Scotland that her undergraduates bring into the classroom. ‘We all know about kilts and bagpipes and they expect that from me, no? Of course! And, usually, within two lessons I have dismantled any romantic notion of Scotland. And I make links with whatever is going on in Italy, tensions between regional/national identities are very strong in my country too, so I have a way of referring to all of these things and to engage their attention while encouraging them to re-think set beliefs and ideas.’

At the masters level (the generalist laurea specialistica only partially maps onto a UK masters degree), where her classes are far more manageable groups of 20, she discusses issues which are directly related to her research: ‘the masters students are very, very good and highly motivated, and sometimes I learn from them. They have never ever worked on Scottish literature before, so they have a very fresh approach. You realise that after 20 years you end up inheriting some of the certainties that go with your field. They also have a good general preparation and, because they study at least three modern literatures, including the Italian one, they adopt, quite spontaneously, a comparative approach. One of the things about our system which I like is that it is a generalist system. Whereas here, the Anglo-Saxon system is specialise, specialise, specialise. This has advantages because I see your PhD students are excellent in whatever they are doing, but then they lack articulation, if I may say so. In Italy, they never specialise. Even at a PhD level, Italian students do not focus exclusively on the subject of their dissertation, they participate in a doctorate ‘school,’ a federation of doctorates within the same subject area. The doctorate school in Human Studies would include history, philosophy, classical studies, modern languages and linguistics … So they certainly work very hard at being humanists … In a sense we still practice, anachronistically, the basic tenets of Renaissance Humanism – the notion that men should try to embrace all knowledge. It may be regarded as a superseded paradigm, but I do believe it still holds value in Human Studies.’

There are many more questions I wish to ask Professor Sassi, but I keep my promise and leave her after an hour, worried that she must be exhausted after such a long day spent engaging in English Subject Centre activities. As I head back to London, I am well aware that, once again, I have been privileged to delve, however briefly, into a colleague’s personal teaching history.
Last spring, we contributed to a panel discussion on teaching Black British literature as part of the On Whose Terms: Critical Negotiations in Black British Literature and the arts conference held at Goldsmiths, University of London (2008), which brought together internationally renowned writers, like Andrea Levy and Malorie Blackman, with critics and teachers. The interaction between panelists and audience presented the opportunity to explore the limited extent to which British universities have made Black British literature a staple aspect of undergraduate courses. We established that other countries, such as the US and Belgium, were more innovative and could provide models for how and why we in the UK should be more concerned, and consistent about the teaching of our full heritage.

Reflecting afterwards, it seems that the key issues are the role that the teaching of English literature plays in defining to whom the English language belongs and by extension whose stories make up the national story, as well as the cultural gate keeping this entails. It is precisely for such reasons that books are important. As Edward Said once remarked, the task of the humanities is not merely of ‘consolidating and affirming what ‘we’ have always known and felt, but rather a means of questioning, upsetting, and reformulating so much of what is presented to us as commodified, packaged, uncontroversial and uncritically codified certainties, including those contained in the masterpieces herded under the rubric of the classics (2004: 28). Yet, universities, as places of thinking, questioning and understanding, remain damaged by the legacy of race and racism. The teaching of English literature is governed precisely by codified certainties that rank and order what is valued. We suggest that the legacy of race thinking and racism compromises the criteria of what is deemed worthy of inclusion.

Internet searching verifies that, nationally, we teach very few courses on ‘Black British literature’. Yet, to state this empirical fact is to inevitably open up the humanistic can of worms. On the one hand, the liberal sensibilities of a few colleagues are offended since, deeply interested, they have sought to be inclusive by adding selected texts to existing courses. On the other hand, the more rigid cultural gatekeepers in our English departments, when pressed, sniff about quality and readily dismiss contemporary literature to what one English professor referred to recently as ‘Mickey Mouse universities’. Whether or not such an offensively evaluative comment referred to ‘new’ universities, we suggest that such reactions reveal unpleasant realities about the degree to which the Humanities and our departments of English are cast in racism’s shadow, especially given increasing information concerning the relative absence of black and ethnic minority students from ‘top’ universities.

Joan Anim-Addo and Les Back explore the politics and history of Black British literature and discuss reasons why it is still not established as part of the core curriculum in most UK English departments. They question the under-representation of black students and academics in English departments and consider how this links to patchy provision for study of this body of literature.
The situation is starkly illustrated in the analysis which highlights: ‘Shockingly, there are more students of black Caribbean origin at London Metropolitan University than all the Russell Group Universities put together’ (Sims citing Curtis, 2007: 4).

From the outset, it needs to be stated that our perceptions of realities within the Humanities is coloured, so to speak, by different locations. On the one hand, Joan speaks from a space characterised as one with a distinct ‘lack of ebony’ (Bunting, 2004) and as a rare, black, female, tenured scholar with a particularised interest in seeing herself reflected on the page. On the other, Les is a white male teacher for whom Black British literature provides a resource to enrich his pedagogy. Together, we share a sense that the Humanities remain, in large part, concerned only with a small fraction of the human family. How this relates to one of the profound conceits of Empire, which ignored or disparaged those citizen migrants who came to the ‘Motherland’ in the Windrush generation, is yet to be researched. While much has changed, the legacy of Empire is still in evidence and we have a long way to go before we can realise a truly multicultural university.

What does this mean? Setting aside the historical presence of a complex black diaspora – Black African, African-Caribbean, Black British – and its literature(s) in the UK, results in ignorance revealed in the most casual of academic exchanges. So, when on introducing a senior member of an English department to a new MPhil/PhD student researching Black British literature, he queried, ‘is there enough material for a PhD?’, the question raised grave concern. It is astonishing that a university teacher of literature could say such a thing given the mass appeal of writers like Andrea Levy and Malorie Blackman or the historical legacy of writers like Samuel Selvon and George Lamming or, indeed, the post-emancipation appeal of Mrs Seacole and, going back to the literature of freed slaves, the autobiography of, for example, Olaudah Equiano. As the saying goes, in the abundance of water only the fool is thirsty.

This is not simply a matter of unawareness. Our overarching blindness to the need for the teaching of Black British literature in UK universities is at once historical and ultimately political. Last year was, after all, the bi-centenary of the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807, a moment about which Joan has written elsewhere as one marking the beginnings of universal recognition of the black body as human (Anim-Addo, forthcoming). By way of reminder, prior to that moment, there had been global agreement that African-heritage people were chattel, that is, not human and, significantly, could not think. Enlightened humanist philosophers such as Kant and Hume confirmed the lowly position of ‘negroes’, that is, those we now perceive as black people and who were confirmed as human only with the end of the trans-Atlantic trade in black bodies. How, then, could these ‘new’ humans be writing much that might be valued and taught in our universities? If they have, indeed, produced a range of books why are they not visible in our bookshops? Most importantly, where are the reviews in prestigious journals? The questions lead inevitably to whether the quality of available writing merits inclusion. After all, as the 18th-century philosopher warned, such writing may well represent slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly (Hume, cited in Eze, 1997: 33).

Space does not permit attention to the range of questions indicated above. Rather, the absence or invisibility of such writing within our academy remains of intense interest since, it seems clear that it is precisely through literature that some of the most articulate black voices have sought to open up and address the absences in the way that the British historical experience has been narrated. At the same time, there appears among the wider reading public to be a genuine thirst for, and an appreciation of, the role that Black British literature has played in working out or working through the legacy of empire and the complexities of postcolonial life. For example, Andrea Levy’s multiple prize-winning novel, Small Island, sold a half a million copies worldwide in its first year of publication. We might also cite the commercial success of Zadie Smith or Monica Ali as additional evidence. This public interest in Black British literature is not reflected in our universities and particularly in departments of English that cling to a literary canon that either ignores or challenges the inclusion of Black British writers within the curriculum.

The meanings of this may be examined in terms of two key questions: first, what happens to Black women’s literature when it is ‘subjected exclusively to critical approaches’ albeit, ‘useful and illuminating’, which do not foreground or give primacy to ‘black women’s experiences and intellectual traditions?’ (Lee, 1995: 201). The second question refers to students denied access to Black women’s theorising and who experience an intellectual tradition marked by the invisibility of Black scholars. In the case of UK universities, and particularly within the Humanities, it is not enough that even rare access to Black scholarship underscores a corresponding absence of those who might be considered our own home-grown Black British literary scholars and who might offer a particular leadership in the field. Anticipating more objections on grounds of ‘quality’, it may be enlightening, perhaps, to point to the identifiable trend of a black brain drain away from British academic culture that ‘is stifling’ Black academics (Christian, 2006).

Lee’s questions might, then, be transposed so as to highlight Black absence and or visibility at professorial and critical leadership levels within universities impacting upon the educational, pedagogical and cultural provision for Black British
features

literature in the UK. While not wishing to promote the fallacy that only Black scholars might be interested to develop Black British literature, it cannot be denied that we have a situation here in Britain where there are signally few Black literary scholars recognised as such at the highest

As HESA figures confirm, of approximately 10 Black female professors in the UK, at least five are in nursing. We have yet to discover one in the Humanities.

level, and correspondingly few courses focused centrally on the literature. In our universities, specifically in our English departments, there is a troubling absence of Black scholars to effectively counter the dormant myth of racial inferiority, of lack of reason and of an inability to produce knowledge. Discussion with students and interested colleagues in the UK and continental Europe confirms that while the under-representation of Black students and academics is rarely challenged, the assumption persists that absence correlates with a non-production of knowledge that might be valued. As one reflective student told Joan, ‘I suppose we have to wait for new course areas to come to the fore.’ That he could not imagine black academics teaching the core areas of an English curriculum is one matter; that new course areas such as Black British writing so rarely surface is deeply problematic.

Our concern then is with black intellectual traditions, including specifically that of literary scholarship in the UK. However, theflagging of gender within this discussion is deliberate, since it is our contention that, regardless of the growing body of academic rhetoric concerning equality, this issue nestles within the wider unspoken debate concerning a corresponding absence or invisibility of women at professorial and critical leadership levels within the Humanities. As Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures confirm, of approximately 10 black female professors in the UK, at least five are in nursing (Bunting). We have yet to discover one in the Humanities. So, ‘the Black woman’ figures these absences metaphorically and literally.

Only too perniciously, while our academic community is denied access to the voices of Black writers themselves or the ‘new’ humans that the Humanities so reluctantly acknowledge. This is what Sylvia Wynter refers to as ‘a second self-assertion’ concerned with ‘altering of our systems of meanings, and their privileged texts’ (1990: 365). Wynter’s novel *Hills of Hebron* was published, here in London, in 1962, following her period of postgraduate study at London University. The notion of the ‘new human’ is borrowed from her theoretical writing for the irony it allows in terms of alluding to the legal recognition of African-heritage people ‘in the West’ as humans only in the 19th-century.

Although Black British literature cannot usually be considered part of the ‘privileged texts’ of our institutions, the cultural production that concerns us is crucially about Wynter’s particularised ‘self-assertion’. This ‘self-assertion’ is precisely what causes the literature to flower, despite the difficult conditions of production. Equally, the situation in British universities, specifically within English

The problem is under-representation of Black students in universities generally and in English departments in particular which then feeds through into the under-representation of Black staff in English departments.
What kind of student audience is there for Black British literature? Often, in planning, there is the assumption that Black students will take up the courses when offered but somehow white students will not find them attractive. This is not the case, though similar thinking prevails in the ‘rejection slips’ of publishers when they suggest that there is no ‘market’ for the literature. Andrea Levy commented in 2005: ‘Publishers have a herd mentality. They were worried that I’d be read only by black people – less than a million and they don’t read anyway ...’ (Allardice, 2005).

Dare we suggest that English professors deny the promise of such literary riches, and questions about who will teach persists. The situation is necessarily complex. Less experienced colleagues, with both the interest and expertise, may well propose such courses, which then become most vulnerable to cuts. A similar effect applies for colleagues at institutions with high teaching loads and, correspondingly, little research time where courses are undertaken but remain invisible to the research community. Equally, research-led teaching may be dependent upon the interest of senior colleagues who are already over-stretched though prepared to tolerate the suspicion that their research on Black British writing is perhaps not quite as stringent as it might be if it were focused on canonical Victorian or Renaissance literature.

Leeds is, of course, not to be singled out in its practice. Edinburgh offers details of a comparable semester-long ‘Postcolonial Poetry’ course which, while ‘including Scottish, Irish and Canadian verse’, offers the ‘main focus’ of ‘Caribbean and Black British’ poetry (www.englit.ed.ac.uk/studying/postgrad/msc/2006-7/coursedisc/cen4spr.htm). While this narrower focus offers a greater certainty in terms of content, the course also allows some insight into the provision available, as well as some appreciation of the handful of enthusiasts who fashion crucial provision often in the face of little real commitment from our institutions. The picture is consistently patchy at undergraduate level. A difference is that ‘Black British Writing’ is unambiguously offered as an optional ‘unit’ at South Bank University and at the University of Warwick. Given the under-representation of these courses, we consider it premature to adopt any prescriptive position. The plurality itself is to be applauded.

We are emphatically not proposing that Black literature be viewed as the exclusive property of Black critics and scholars, but we are saying that Black intellectual voices should be part of the communities of interpretation, criticism and knowledge production. In the UK, as in much of Europe, the ‘Academy’, may seem from the perspective of the Black student to be an ivory tower in more than one sense. This underscores the issue of the under-representation of Black faculty within the Humanities and by inference within English departments of many universities. While statistical evidence is unavailable, Wakeling’s paradigmatic linking of postgraduates produced by an institution to the ‘socio-demographic composition of the discipline’s personnel’ (Wakeling, 946), serves to confirm the likelihood that, given the composition of English faculty, the reality of under-representation is set to continue.

We wish to argue that Black British literature is integral to understanding British history and our current predicament. An Andrea Levy or George Lamming novel allows its readers to inhabit themselves in the curriculum. The problem is under-representation of Black students in universities generally, and in English departments in particular, which then feeds through into the under-representation of Black staff in English departments.
the historical imagination as citizen migrants. This experience is not a separate story but part of our collective historical narrative. In addition to the crucial significance of their aesthetics, these texts challenge the provincialism of their national identity question and point to imperial interconnections, linking the fates as well as certain divisions along the lines of colour and shade. “Britain is finally beginning to gather up its more distant voices and listen to the rich stories they have to tell, stories that are as central to the history of Britain and British literature as anything we are more familiar with,” concludes Andrea Levy. In the 21st-century, this gathering up of voices is not taking place in our universities to the extent to that it should be. Rather, Black British literature remains, at best, marginal.

To conclude, British universities remain ivory towers in which the legacy of racism affects and damages academic judgments and hierarchies of value. Put bluntly, the absence of Black British literature on the curriculum is a result of a genteel racism that colours intellectual judgments. Thus, Black British literature, under-valued by colleagues, is not widely taught. The invisibility of Black/ethnic minority staff members in English departments compounds this situation and re-enforces the under-representation of ‘blackness’, particularly in academic areas, such that white students remain ignorant that they are even missing out on a particular literary tradition, while their black and brown peers perceive English as a subject of little positive value to them. This situation cannot be transformed overnight by specialist courses. Indeed, much discussion remains concerning the presence of Black writing within specialist courses or their integration within the core content of English programmes of study. Our contention is that, here in the UK, we are merely at the beginning of a process that is ultimately inescapable. This is because what is finally at stake in the teaching of Black British literature is the realisation of the multicultural university that admits fully the diversity of humankind on the curriculum, at the lectern and in the classroom. Only then will the Humanities be truly deserving of its name.
Assessment is crucial. No other aspect of pedagogic practice has such power to enhance or to limit student learning. This major two-day conference, jointly organised by the English Subject Centre and the Assessment for Learning CETL at Northumbria, will provide an exciting opportunity for lecturers to reflect critically on current assessment methods, to present case studies and to raise fundamental questions about the whys, whats and hows of assessment in our disciplines.

**Topics addressed will include the following questions:**

- What should the relationship be between new forms of assessment and our traditional reliance on the essay?
- How do we deal with student plagiarism?
- How do we improve our feedback methods, so that students get a clear sense of how they can improve their work?
- How do we help new undergraduates adjust to higher education approaches to assessment?
- What skills do we want our students to have at the end of their degrees?
- How can Creative Writing be assessed?
- How can technology help assessment?
- What do students think about the assessment tasks we set them?
- How can we best make assessment sufficiently diverse and accessible?

**Confirmed plenary speakers:**
Peter Barry, Richard Terry, Michelene Wandor, Rob Pope

The conference is free, though there will be a charge for the conference dinner.

To attend this event, register now at [www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/events/](http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/events/)
Taking a Departmental Approach to E-learning Support

Some of our colleagues are successfully changing the culture of their departments by introducing, and then supporting, practical and innovative uses of digital technology. Brett Lucas reports on the project which is helping e-learning gain a firm foothold in sometimes sceptical environments.

Why do some English lecturers embrace teaching with new technologies while others view it with scorn and dread? Two years ago I reported on the English Subject Centre’s E-Advocates project, which was all about embedding and facilitating effective support for e-learning in English courses (see Newsletter 11). This article provides an update on the outcomes of that project as it reaches the end of its second highly successful year reaching across nine English departments. The results provide useful insights into how departments can provide more effective support for individual academics wishing to incorporate new teaching and learning tools into their classroom practice. The key, we’ve learned, is to consider subject-based support solutions to complement existing institutional or faculty-based e-learning support.

Background

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), Managed Learning Environments (MLEs) and other e-learning tools have become ubiquitous throughout higher education in the past few years. However, research carried out by the English Subject Centre has shown that their actual use in delivering enhanced teaching in blended learning environments is patchy to say
the least. In a national survey of English departments we carried out in 2005, we confirmed that two of the principal barriers to the development of effective e-learning practice among English academics were lack of time and insufficient or inappropriate support. In the same year as our study, the UK government’s own 5-year e-learning strategy, ‘Harnessing Technology: transforming learning and children’s services’, echoed our findings: one of the government’s six key priorities for reform was ‘good-quality ICT training and support’. Unfortunately, even though we now have national and institutional strategies and drivers for the embedding of e-learning, there is a frustrating mismatch between the rhetoric and the reality in a typical university English department.

On the one hand we hear that new technologies are radically changing what and how we teach, while simultaneously enhancing the way our students learn; on the other hand we find, in many English departments, such things as:

- Staff too busy with the day-to-day demands of ‘being an academic’ to either familiarise themselves with the potential for new technologies to transform their teaching practice or gain the necessary skills to achieve this.
- Students finding the delivery of blended learning to be patchy across years and modules (eg all modules in the first year involving some blended learning while just a few in the second and third do).
- Archaic hardware on academics’ desks eg PCs with low memory and poor multimedia support.
- Inadequate IT infrastructure in allocated teaching spaces.
- No department-wide strategy for ICT skills development/literacy for either staff or students.

Not surprisingly, the persistence of strong cultural resistance to anything ‘digital’ is exacerbating these support issues. Ironically, many of the messages that the wider e-learning community and the national support agencies may have hoped were getting through to individual English academics, are not.

Local support for academics usually means they have access to some combination of the following:

- One-to-one or group meetings with a departmental, school or faculty e-learning rep/learning technologist.
- Centrally run generic training workshops/induction programmes (eg ‘How to use WebCT’) which may or may not be divided into levels.
- Co-ordinated professional development programmes.
- Institutional e-learning seminars (which may or may not be subject specific).
- Internal or external e-learning or teaching funds for e-learning projects.
- Staff rewards for e-learning work (eg e-learning champions).
- Attending national e-learning conferences, events etc.
- Online help and advice either on the intranet or Internet.
- Help manuals, e-learning books or academic journals.

While the support mechanisms detailed above aim to support the embedding of e-learning, in practice they are not proving effective enough. Other research shows how, all too often, staff are unclear as to the relevance of e-learning courses to their practice or even aware that courses are available and struggle to develop courses themselves (Quinsee & Simpson, 2005). Sound familiar?

So what is going wrong?

- Have we created expectations of support that just cannot be met?
- Do academics feel more comfortable hearing about new teaching ideas, whether using technology or otherwise, from their subject peers rather than ‘outsiders’?
- Would it be more effective to embed the support within the department rather than rely on external mechanisms/drivers to draw academics in?

To find answers to these questions, the E-Advocate project (funded by the JISC Distributed e-learning (DEL) programme) is exploring a different support model. The project involves the appointment of a self-selected ‘e-learning advocate’, supported by their Head of Department, who gets a day a week buyout for an academic year to work with their colleagues on e-learning-related initiatives.

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Table 1: E-learning advocates and their institutions over the 2-year project period (**= HOD)

**Approach**

In the two stages of the project (2006–2007 and 2007–2008), English departments across the UK were invited to submit proposals indicating how they would embed e-learning in their departments given the support of a nominated e-learning advocate for one day a week. The advocate would act as both a catalyst for change within the department and a source of practical help and advice for those wishing to make greater use of e-learning. Interested departments submitted innovative ideas which reached across their departments (and in one case region) and involved design, development and refuging of e-learning materials, integration of new teaching tools, like blogs and podcasts, and new assessment methods. Applicants also had to demonstrate how the support model proposed would integrate with existing institution-based strategies, initiatives or support structures.
Features

In the first year six advocates were chosen. In the second year we were able to fund three more advocate roles, one of which was shared between two academics. We also created a new role of ‘e-learning consultant’ whose function was to act as a roving ambassador of e-learning among all the participants and to assist the project manager in an evaluative role (see Table 1).

The academics chosen comprise a mix of experience levels from a range of higher education institutional contexts, all of whom share an enthusiasm for what e-learning can bring to the student learning experience. All six advocates from stage 1 have written reports on their work, which are available from the English Subject Centre website.

Results to date

‘The e-advocacy award … not only freed a little time for additional work on these projects, but (more importantly, I think) gave a demonstration of external support that was enormously useful in negotiating both at department and faculty level. In an atmosphere in which it’s very hard (still) to secure time for pursuing e-learning developments.’ (Horsley, 2007)

The project is now reaching the end of its second and final year, and some of the many achievements are profiled below:

I Pedagogical development

All nine advocates have developed, extended and improved both their own as well as many of their colleagues’ online courses.

Examples

- At Bishop Grosseteste (BG), the advocate has increased the breadth and depth of e-learning use in the department. The freeing up of time allowed the department to incorporate aspects of e-learning into all the courses offered through the VLE for the first time. At Wolverhampton and Lancaster discussion forum activities were introduced, extended and, in some cases, assessed. Plymouth introduced a wiki-based activity where students created annotated texts collaboratively. Aberystwyth has been working with the Computer Science department in the development of a computer game that could facilitate deeper textual engagement among literature students.

II Shaping policy

Having an English academic on an institutional committee has enabled the shaping of school, faculty and university learning and teaching strategies from a Humanities perspective.

Examples

- At Birmingham City University (BCU), e-learning has been put at the forefront of school and faculty plans, through the influence of the e-learning advocate who has been influential in determining priorities. At Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), the advocate has mediated in complex infrastructural issues that were threatening to undermine the distance teaching programme within the department.

III Sharing of best practice

Every advocate had a different way of doing this, but all agreed that it was of primary importance when working with colleagues.

Examples

- Putting together a series of staff development workshops proved popular, encouraging staff to share what they were doing with each other, bouncing ideas off outside guest speakers (from other English departments) or networking with other local e-learning support staff. At Lancaster instruction sessions were provided to postgraduate and inexperienced lecturers first, as these groups proved more receptive to new ideas. At Northampton, working with individuals, or groups of two or three on specific issues and tools, with a particular end in view (such as how to set the ‘tone’ of academic discourse in a blog) proved more practical and productive than formal staff development sessions.

IV Personal development and recognition

One of the most fascinating results of the project has been the way in which winning external project money has ‘shone a light’ on the advocate, and this has often resulted in both an increased recognition of English needs and requirements (see II), as well as more funding becoming available.

Examples

- At Hull £7,500 was made available for a mini-lab, and at BCU resources were made available to refurbish derelict teaching space, and several advocates had their ‘antique’ computer hardware upgraded.

V Building the departmental skills base

Departments showed a diversity of approaches to the development of e-learning skills.

Examples

- At BCU, the advocate realised that what staff wanted was not examples of what they might do, but help in developing what they were already doing. At Hull personalised training courses were developed for staff in the use of the Interactive Whiteboard. Aberystwyth carried out a skills audit at the beginning of their advocacy and subsequently ran a workshop on how to use writeboards (shareable web-based documents that enable collaboration), because that was where staff interest was concentrated. The workshop was then posted to the staff Blackboard site.

VI Updating spaces

21st-century flexible and well-equipped learning spaces can be a catalyst for educational change. Some advocates were able to take advantage of opportunities in their institutions.

Examples

- Refurbishment work in the arts building at Northampton resulted in significant equipment upgrade in all the teaching rooms partly encouraged by the project. Similarly, an interactive whiteboard lab was built at Hull, and most teaching spaces at BG acquired Interactive Whiteboards.
VII Better understanding of the student experience

Involving students in the departments’ e-learning initiatives was highlighted as crucial by many of the advocates.

Examples
- Aberystwyth carried out a comprehensive survey of all undergraduate and postgraduate students, expectations and experiences of e-learning at the start of their advocacy. BCU ran focus groups with student volunteers, where they were encouraged to articulate their experiences and expectations, informing decisions about the kinds of activities likely to be successful.

VIII Breaking down disciplinary barriers

Could virtual space assist in the breaking down of barriers between English subjects and cognate subjects?

Examples
- At Lancaster the advocate worked hard to extend the already successful e-learning approaches used in the Creative Writing programmes over to the teaching of literature. At Hull colleagues from English, American Studies, Film Studies and Creative Writing shared ideas about using interactive whiteboard software in joint workshops.

IX Effective use of e-learning tools and resources

New e-learning tools were incorporated into many courses across the nine institutions involved in the project.

Examples
- Of particular note would be the successful incorporation of wikis (for annotating texts and supporting seminars) into courses at Plymouth and MMU. Northampton developed the use of blogs for summative assessment and student reflection throughout a module, and the advocate noted that it was in this area that the most progress was made and where there was the greatest impact on student work. Podcasting too was introduced to staff and incorporated into several modules.

Issues

While the results are impressive, some of the advocates have experienced challenges when working with colleagues as an ‘advocate’ of a particular educational orthodoxy. The resistance, mentioned previously, may take longer than a year to break down. Several advocates had to trim back their original project plans as the year proceeded, as they were simply attempting to do too much over too many courses or attempting to ‘win over’ every colleague in the department.

There was a growing appreciation among all the advocates that the work they were undertaking is ongoing and that one academic year was not enough to register substantial change. Colleagues need time to integrate new teaching ideas into courses and much of the advocates’ work would bear fruit in subsequent years.

Ironically, another issue identified was that change often outstrips the support that is available. This was particularly true in relation to podcasting (is there a streaming server available?) and wikis (I’m not allowed to use an externally hosted service). Technology itself is still a huge barrier, with problems such as unreliability of provision, insufficient bandwidth, old kit or disorganised server upgrades.

For more tips, read the online version of the Newsletter …
Conclusions

The context in which most higher education practitioners work today does not facilitate the experimentation and play necessary for exploration of effective e-learning pedagogy. This project has been a source of stimulation and productivity for all nine departments involved because it has given nine academics that opportunity. It has connected lecturers from different universities in new kinds of communities, yet each person has focused on innovation within a particular curriculum and a particular institution. It has also added an element of persistence to staff development projects and personalised the issue of e-learning within a host department (Ringrose, 2007). In all the departments involved, the groundwork has been laid from which significant benefits may be reaped in future years.

For similar opportunities to be available to the wider community, more resource will need to be made available to departments to establish advocacy programmes. I would urge Heads of English Departments to consider making funding available or apply for internal funding for this kind of initiative.

Continuing the achievements of existing advocates will need further energy and efforts to be applied to achievements made to date. While delivering blended learning can save time in the medium term, online courses still require care, attention, nurturing, refreshing and even overhaul!

If we, as Humanities practitioners, want to join the educational technology revolution that is occurring around us, we need to step back and look at the wider picture. More digitisation, more electronic resources, more e-books, more e-literate students more features in the VLE are all a given. But only if we have a departmental skills base that is able to discuss the pros and cons of all these teaching tools/resources from a common knowledgeable starting point will we, as a community, be able to shape this pedagogy. Having an e-learning advocate down the corridor might just be the best way to achieve this.

References


E-learning advocates

Matthew Day
Bishop Grosseteste

Stuart Robertson
Birmingham City University

Lee Horsley
Lancaster

Leslie Coote
Hull

Will Slocombe and Louise Marshall
Aberystwyth

Chris Ringrose
Northampton

Peter Hinds
Plymouth

Rosie Miles
Wolverhampton
'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

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.
Series Editor: C. B. Knights

All 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). Just enter the code WTEACH08a into the promotional box on the checkout page when you order from www.palgrave.com.
Leitch, Skills and Prosperity for All: towards a humanities perspective

**Ben Knights** presented an earlier version of this article to the Humanities Subject Centres as an attempt to think about how our disciplines could present themselves to funders and ‘stakeholders’ in the light of the Government’s commitment to everything that is summed up in the term ‘Leitch’, or ‘the Leitch agenda’. (Prosperity for All in the Global Economy: Final Report of the Leitch Review of Skills. HMSO 2006.) Lord Leitch’s report, along with the rise of the Sector Skills Councils represents a major step in the involvement of the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (formerly the DTI) in educational policy.

**Ben Knights** is the Director of the English Subject Centre. His most recent book is Masculinities in Text and Teaching (Palgrave, 2007).

The analysis of economic causality has not been one of the great success stories of modern economic history. The techniques which permit a high level of precision in economic analysis do not marry comfortably with attempts to identify what has been going on in the human world, let alone with efforts to assess what is likely to do so in the humanly relevant future. These techniques require idealization, and powerfully ... mathematized abstraction: the thinking away of almost all the clutter of human experience ... What is clear is that the demands of these techniques ... virtually rule out an analysis of an economy as a field of human interaction massively influenced by a rich variety of types of human preoccupation and purpose (political, cultural, spiritual), which are extremely volatile over time and in no sense constituted by economic categories themselves. (John Dunn. The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics. London: HarperCollins, 2000: 348–9)

This article invites ‘English people’, of whatever description, to build on the commonalities we share with the other so-called ‘Humanities’. As disciplines, we have many of the same strengths and are vulnerable to many of the same criticisms. Thus, arguments about the ‘decline of the industrial spirit’, of the kind proposed by the historian Correlli Barnett, cannot simply be discounted. Nor (from another political direction) can Pierre Bourdieu’s damaging association of the Humanities with inherited cultural capital. Going back to their forebears in the post-Romantic ‘clerisy’, Humanities intellectuals have a history of making sweeping claims about their own social significance which should make us wary of exaggerating our collective value to society, or of simply re-hashing arguments about the value of ‘liberal education’. (But see Nussbaum, 1997.) There is, nevertheless, a case to be made, provided it can be made with due sensitivity towards other agencies within a plural intellectual, scientific and social economy.

Key to the significance of this group of disciplines, is the absence of a clear boundary between the subject matter of our scholarship and teaching within universities on the one hand and, on the other, cultural activities and practices that go on ceaselessly in society at large. Writing, drama, music, historical enquiry, formal and informal debate and commentary have a vigorous life in society at large that is only obliquely connected with, and rarely dependent upon, university scholarship.

Many of the exaggerated claims made in the past derive from intellectuals’ attempts to insist upon the value they add to everyday symbolic activity. The other way round, a large part of the significance of the Humanities could be seen to derive precisely from this continuity. By generating knowledge and refining the terms of discourse we contribute to what is, effectively, a social conversation. Together with practitioners and readers, we contribute to the maintenance of what the McMaster Report (Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgment – [www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/Arts/mcmaster_review.htm]) refers to as the ‘cultural ecology’. Put another way, we study (often in highly practical ways) the creation, testing and communication of significance.

In our attempt to demonstrate our economic relevance, we would be unwise to become fixated on the so-called Cultural Industries. Clearly the Cultural Industries are now major players in the economy, and equally clearly what and how the Humanities teach feed into such activity¹. The Cultural Industries play a growing, if disputed, role in urban and regional regeneration. But however vibrant and dynamic the cultural industries of the 21st-century prove to be, the demand for script and copywriters, novelists, festival organisers, film and programme makers, animators and so on is likely to remain finite. We would render ourselves very vulnerable (eg to the effects of economic recession or changing leisure fashions) if that were the only mast to carry our flag.
Nevertheless, in the light of the McMaster review of the arts, the Cultural Industries furnish us with a ready-made argument that imagination, ceremony and play are very far from trivial.

The Leitch Review does not actually say as much about universities and Level 4 skills as might be supposed from the menacing way in which it has been held over us. Much of the paradigm shift Leitch demands rests upon the vision (chapter 5) of ‘employer engagement’ in the delivery of skills. Thus, at Level 4, universities should be incentivised to ‘respond effectively to employer and individual demand’. And, more sinisterly, the Commission ‘should monitor the relationship between higher education and employers to make sure that the reforms recommended by the Review lead to a step change in collaboration.’ (5.74) We can only extract a detailed agenda for universities by extrapolation, and Leitch does not purport to enter into matters of curriculum or pedagogy. The review stresses that the current UK skills deficit is ‘most severe at the bottom end’ (3.3.8): the UK seriously trails comparator economies in basic and intermediate skills, and, while we might protest that this is a social and human disaster as well as an economic one, the universities can only act very indirectly on that situation. The Humanities disciplines cannot simply attempt to answer Leitch in its own terms, for those terms already largely exclude the very things we might wish to talk about. Thus the ‘skills agenda’ and the cult of competencies has been around for over 20 years now, and is still vulnerable to the same critique – viz. that it rests on a pragmatically useful, but extremely partial, theory of learning. In parallel, Leitch draws on an impoverished account of human endeavour, and one that is subject to the devastating critique of human capital theory advanced by Frank Coffield and others. (See, for example, his inaugural lecture at the Institute of Education [www.ioe.ac.uk/schools/leid/lss/FClinauralLectureDec06.doc]

Nor are skills value-neutral. As Ron Barnett has argued, the use of a skill requires a prior judgment on the appropriateness of that skill to the situation concerned and, indeed, informed judgment as to whether it is the right situation to be in. (That is to say that the deployment of skills takes place within a matrix which in the final analysis is itself cultural and value-laden.)

A higher education organised around skills is no higher education. It is the substitution of technique for insight; of strategic reason for communicative reason; and of behaviour for wisdom. (Barnett, 1994: 61)

In short, we shall only get so far by limiting ourselves to working within Leitch’s own terms. We should neither bend over backwards trying to prove ourselves Leitch-friendly, but nor should we engage in the kind of satisfying but provocative public critique to which some of us might be tempted. A more positive approach would be to seek to complement the argument – urging a broadening of the idea of the economy to encompass what in the banal phrase is known as ‘quality of life’. The interactions of humans with each other and themselves are only very partially describable in terms of customers and providers. The Humanities could have considerable weight in articulating the remainder. At the same time, the economic analysis is, after all, open to dispute in its own terms, not least the observation that the paradigm derived from the City and the financial sector concentrates on very short-term returns. (A contemporary re-statement of the argument can be found in Elliott and Atkinson, 2008.) Or that the assumption of everlastong growth on which it rests is simply unsustainable. It is not simply retrograde to argue for a more nuanced, dialectical understanding of the relationship between the economy, the environment and civil society.

How can our subjects claim to complement Leitch? We can start by celebrating the aims of raising aspiration and ‘embedding a culture of learning’ (chapter 6 passim). But while applauding the ambition to raise aspiration, we could press for a richer definition of all that might be encompassed by such aspiration. There is no shortage of evidence that, generally speaking, humans treasure other things as well as material wealth – indeed that the compulsive search for wealth may often represent a substitute for more profound satisfactions. (I’m drawing here, among other sources, on the sociologist Richard Sennett’s important books Respect: The Formation of Character in an Age of Inequality, 2003 and The Corrosion of Character: the Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism, 1998.) Such an approach might lead us to talk about matters like fairness, recognition, respect, security, hope, dignity, the feeling of belonging, shared memory or access to aesthetic expression. All things which the Humanities disciplines treat as knowledge and, as practice, help, articulate, describe, and remember. The other side of this argument demands recognition of ever-increasing evidence that ‘the way we live now’ not only engenders widespread boredom, but, more frighteningly, (and expensively) depression, self-harm, substance abuse and mental health problems of near epidemic proportions. The Humanities are equipped to engage in and foster the conversations that livable societies need. (One example among many would concern the rise of the so-called Medical Humanities, and the roles of writing in forms of therapy.) That Leitch’s vision of a globally ambitious, up-skilled population needs to be enriched by a denser, more ambitious version of human aspiration and inventiveness is born out by a recent survey by the Work Foundation (http://tinyurl.com/6mnqsd), which seems to demonstrate that the four most ‘iconic’ occupations are currently hair dressers, management consultants, celebrities and managers. While Leitch is committed to leaving initiative to the market, these may not be the kind of examples of ‘high value-added industry’ that he had in mind.

To argue, as Leitch does, for ‘demand-led skills’ (chapter 4 passim) itself requires that employers, entrepreneurs or policy makers have the imagination to think towards the skills which might be needed beyond the present moment. The alternative is the default demand for employees who will, basically, do what they are told, a predilection memorably analysed in relation to telesales by Deborah Cameron. So we have to go beyond ‘demand-led skills’. Between them, our disciplines practise and enhance what the evolutionary anthropologist Michael Tomasello refers to as profoundly significant ‘joint attentional activities’ (1999: 6-7). In dialogue with our sources and our students we promote sociable knowledge. It might be too simplistic...
to claim that the Humanities extend the range and sophistication of human cognition, but evolutionary psychology can be cited in support. Steven Pinker has, in the past, been no friend to social science or cultural studies, but he has an important point to make:

Left to our own devices, we are apt to backslide to our instinctive conceptual ways. This underscores the place of education in a scientifically literate democracy, and even suggests a statement of purpose for it (a surprisingly elusive principle in higher education today). The goal of education is to make up for the shortcomings in our instinctive ways of thinking about the physical and social world. (2007: 439. My emphasis.)

If language and culture constitute our species equipment for overcoming our evolutionary shortcomings, then the Humanities disciplines (as communities of practice) are there to service, refine and maintain that equipment through scholarship and teaching. For Nussbaum, the ‘narrative imagination’ is a crucial component in learning to become ‘citizens of the world’ (Nussbaum, 1997, chs. 2–3) and is thus a democratising force. The Humanities disciplines service the symbolic and narrative environment, taking their place among the organisations and practices which sustain both memory and social imagination – a symbolic eco-system for values and longer-term choices which is not, in turn, irrelevant to the domain of economic production and distribution. They safeguard a space for encounters with the unexpected, provide mental maps for navigating complexity and (even on a narrow analysis) play their part in creating the preconditions for ‘blue skies thinking’. Alongside other sources, they supply nutrients for all kinds of creativity by promoting analogical thought.

For the English disciplines this could even be the moment to revive what might, on the face of things, sound like a Leavisite argument about maturity. Let’s just say that the consumer credit culture has created and relied upon systemic infantilisation. Groups and generations are salami-sliced into niche markets for the grooming of evanescent desires. It is not the least significance of thoughtful attention to texts and discourses that it enables continued vertical dialogue between generations. In the US, the National Endowment for the Arts has noted a strong correlation between literary reading and other forms of active civic participation (www.arts.gov/pub/ReadingATRisk.pdf).

If we are to contest forms of knowledge predicated on the domination of the natural and social environment, the Humanities will need to change too. In an age of impending ecological disaster, there is an environmentally informed case to be made as well. To ‘get out of the grooves of fatal destiny in which our civilization is now caught’ would, argued Gregory Bateson, require above all social flexibility (1972: 472). To make ethical choices requires adequate symbolic equipment. The ability of the academic practitioners of the Humanities to mediate across boundaries, to balance the claims of the past and of the future, to support their students in navigating the as yet unknown could turn out to be central to what we may learn to call a ‘green pedagogy’. The Humanities contribute through their scholarship and the learning environments they create to producing the equipment, the symbolic tools which 21st-century citizens will need. In providing a medium for responsible dialogue between cultures, communities and generations, they stimulate hospitality towards the strange and different. Our students are equipped to act as translators, go-betweens and inter-cultural ambassadors. They possess the skills and knowledge to build and maintain symbolic communities. An ambitious argument on behalf of the Humanities, as scholarship and as pedagogic practice must be based on a holistic vision for the human environment.

There is another side to all this. We cannot stand up and make these or similar public claims on the basis of disciplinary self-satisfaction. To pursue a forceful dialogue with the culture at large requires that we, within universities, strive to bring all our teaching up to the standard of the best. If the Humanities subjects are going to claim the public significance to which they are eminently entitled, then we have, at the same time, to put our own pedagogic house in order.

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Networking Day for Humanities Careers Advisers
16 July 2008

The Networking Day for Humanities Careers Advisers is now an annual event in the English Subject Centre’s calendar. It is an opportunity for those careers advisers who specialise in working with Humanities students to get together to share issues, ideas and experiences. It is also an opportunity for the English Subject Centre to keep in touch with a professional group who can play a significant role in the student experience and who have much to contribute to employability initiatives. This year, it was held at the University of Birmingham, and the focus was on working with employers (in previous years the theme has been working with students and with academic staff). Organiser Jane Gawthrope reports: The day included practice-sharing sessions which showcased work-related learning modules as well as projects designed specifically to enhance services to English students.
(see www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/careers/careers8.php). Three employers explained why they wanted to recruit Humanities graduates and what career opportunities they could offer them. These employers were not the ‘usual suspects’ based in publishing or the media. They were an infrastructure development consultancy (Halcrow), a financial consultancy (Deloitte UK) and a car rental company (Enterprise-Rent-a-Car). All three explained that they looked for graduates with creativity, analytical skills and commitment, regardless of subject background, and wished that more Humanities students would approach them. The day concluded with a series of discussions in ‘World Café’ format, where participants took great delight in writing on tablecloths and helping themselves to the jelly-babies provided to sustain them. The lesson I took from the day was that one of the attractions of a Humanities degree is that it opens a wide range of opportunities, so employability initiatives must cultivate a wide range of employers across a number of sectors, to help students fulfil their graduate potential.

More details, presentations and outcomes from the day can be viewed at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/events/event_detail.php?event_index=183

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**Reading In Practice – extending students’ reading and learning through community engagement**

Many UK university teachers complain, informally, that students do not read widely enough, that reading is increasingly seen as something defined by course curricula. This project offers students an opportunity to extend their reading and to ‘make it real’ by connecting their reading to the needs of people who make up the community reading groups run by The Reader Outreach Unit, attached to the School of English at Liverpool University. This project aims to help students get more involved in reading by encouraging them to take their skills and enthusiasm out to the wider community. The project involves undergraduate students in literature outreach projects, offering opportunities for ‘real-world’ learning, working alongside professionals in the fields of health and community work and gaining valuable transferable skills which relate to the academic discipline of English. By seeing, for example, how valuable poetry can be in a real life setting, such as a hostel for homeless people, it is hoped that students may return to their course with a greater sense of engagement and endeavour. This project, at the University of Liverpool is being led by P.M. Davis in partnership with Josie Billington and Jane Davis.

For more details and information on this, and all English Subject Centre projects, go to the Project pages of our website www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/index.php

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**The Value of Literary Analysis to City Financial Institutions**

The sophisticated manipulation of sign systems is the main business of literature and high finance. Thinking in abstractions, using analogies, moving spheres of reference, creating chains of referents ... seemingly, the City should be stuffed with English graduates. Theorists of the knowledge economy talk in poststructuralist terms of chains of credit and information, of global and local networks and of the innovative city environment. New businesses spring up to serve these, from coffee shops to web-designers to corporate communications companies. Meanwhile, English – the very discipline which boasts of how it analyses creativity – sits twiddling its thumbs on the sidelines. Yet surely we are the best at tactfully moving between signifiers and signifieds, we are the best at knowing what communicative structures produce the most creative responses, we are the best at reader response. We could be – maybe already are – treasures in the City. Or are we? Most work so far has been on the skills provided by all Humanities degrees, to all types of employer. Seeking subject specificity, we will be asking a sample of English graduates now in working in the City three principal questions: whether and how the study of English increased their efficiency, what they think creativity is in their profession and how English academics might be of use in extending their business or providing training. We will feed back to the English subject community a set of case studies that will substantiate the anecdotal advice on careers we give students. This project, at Bangor University, is being led by Ceri Sullivan, Department of English, and coordinated by Eben Muse, Project Co-ordinator, National Institute for Excellence in the Creative Industries.

For more details and information on this, and all English Subject Centre projects, go to the Project pages of our website www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/index.php
Creative Pedagogies

Every year the Higher Education Academy sponsors a student essay writing competition on a set topic. Each Subject Centre picks its winner who is then entered into the next round. While she did not gain the 2008 grand prize, Manchester Metropolitan University student Nicola Harlow, wrote the best essay submitted by an English literature, Creative Writing or English language student, for which she was awarded £250. We are pleased to present her essay to you.

What Makes a Good English or Creative Writing Lecturer?

A Creative Writing tutor can, at best, inspire and develop the writing of her students. At worst she can preside over an arena of gladiatorial combat from which no one emerges unscathed. To run a successful Creative Writing session, the tutor’s skills in group management are just as important as her subject knowledge, publishing record and qualifications.

Take a ‘typical’ group of students on a part-time Creative Writing MA course: a middle-aged man with a doctorate in Astro-physics and a lot to say for himself, a young mother with four children and no time, a couple of silent young men, an aggressive OFSTED inspector and a woman with terminal cancer... All adults with cluttered lives on hold, their secret passion, writing, at last to be given ventilation.

But before the first workshop has begun we’ve clocked each other and decided half the class is too clever for us and the other half too thick, too young or too not like us. Before our tutor has walked through the door, we’re feeling pretty defensive, maybe ready to go home...

Our tutor, if she’s worth her salt, will be prepared for this. The first thing she will do is make our group a safe place to be. She will encourage us to open up, to allow our fellow students a peek behind our public faces into our vulnerable aspirations as writers. At the very beginning of term in my MA workshop, we were given an exercise in which each student explained to another the novel she wanted to write. The partner then wrote a blurb for this novel and read it out. This was an incredible exercise in trust. Each of us had to trust a stranger to be kind about our embryonic projects, to somehow interpret unformed ideas and vague plotlines to create the description that could ‘sell’ the book. It worked. All the ideas sounded good. Even if none of them get written, an atmosphere of mutual support was built during that session.

This is vital. By attending Creative Writing workshops, we are not only investing in our own work but each other’s, and the commitment has to be there right from the beginning.

A good tutor will nurture this commitment by encouraging students to be generous, but critical, with each other’s work. A few ground-rules help. My tutor forbids swearing. We are also discouraged from the faux modesty of introducing a piece of work by saying, ‘this is really rubbish but ...’.

But, surely we don’t need rules and regulations in adult education in order to behave...

There are reasons why this trust breaks down, and, although these might not be the fault of the tutor, it is up to her to control it. Take my fictional class. One week we were discussing Sue’s first chapter of her romantic novel. It was pretty raw, the layout all over the place, grammar and punctuation virtually non existent. Sue has a first degree in English Lit but has never shared any of her own writing before. Astrophysicist Derek began the critique session. He is used to a confrontational scientific approach and proud of his ‘pulling no punches’ way of talking. Our tutor was either unaware or unable to stop him saying what he perceived as the truth, which was: ‘This was completely unreadable. I can’t see anyone wanting to pick this up but your mother.’ Sue burst into tears. The OFSTED inspector accused Derek of sexism. He defended himself by saying that he thought polite praise was pointless and only honest criticism was useful. Some of the class agreed. The tutor could hardly be heard above the ensuing row. By the tutor seizing control the moment Derek began his critique, an unpleasant situation might have been avoided.

Nicola Harlow is a student at Manchester Metropolitan University.
But the damage was done. Everyone felt so battered by the argument that they hardly dared speak. For weeks afterwards, a horrible politeness descended on the group. It is the tutor’s job to facilitate the kind of discussion in which errors and developmental problems can be sensitively raised, as well as praise. Each student must be encouraged to contribute, not only by submitting pieces for feedback, but to the general discussion. If it happens, as above, that a few assertive students are hogging the discussion, this can be avoided by encouraging students to take turns to speak. Turn taking is also a way of avoiding rude interruptions and over-heated discussion. By only having to deal with one student at a time, the tutor can steer the discussion far more effectively and prompt those who are being over polite to be a little more critical in their feedback.

Finally, the best tutors willingly make themselves available for individual questions and assistance. Course handbooks inform students about the frequency and length of time allotted for personal tutorials, but sometimes we are made to feel that they are an inconvenience to an overworked tutor. Most students are not crazed stalkers, nor do they demand more time or help than is fair. Most, however, do need some individual guidance. Often, Creative Writing students are self-funding, giving up valuable time and resources to complete a chosen course. As I have tried to illustrate, we hail from a variety of backgrounds, are at different stages of development as writers and have different expectations of the course. A good tutor will be sensitive to the needs of the individual as well the group and the requirements of the course.

In the end, there is no such thing as a perfect Creative Writing tutor. Depending on the particular mix of personalities in a group, she may at times become a cross between a nursery teacher, a dictator and an agony aunt. But by establishing an atmosphere of trust from the beginning, by being assertive and leading discussion when needed, workshops will be power houses of creativity, students’ work will develop and, for the tutor, there will be the satisfaction of seeing a pile of great novels and glowing testimonials at the end of the course.

Visit our website where you can read the runner-up entry by Tom Hammond of Lancaster University www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/studexp/essays.php

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

This report explores the best way to introduce first-year undergraduates to English studies. Based on research conducted in 10 English departments, it focuses on the design of the first-year curriculum, but covers a multitude of related issues with implications that reach beyond the first year, including: assessment, the transition from A Level study, staff deployment, skills development and cores and options. Rather than laying down a set of ‘best practice’ recommendations, the author, David Ellis, acknowledges that the issues and variables pertaining from one institution to another are complex, and one size most certainly does not fit all. This report will be an invaluable guide to anyone working on the design and implementation of first-year programmes.

The report is available as a PDF on the English Subject Centre website at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/reports.php, but if you would like a print copy e-mail esc@rhul.ac.uk with your address.
Orb, is the interactive Creative Writing magazine of the University of Hertfordshire. It provides a vibrant, interactive forum for UK university students to publish and promote their writing. The first issue was launched on 23 October 2007, and the second issue debuted on 29 April 2008. In this article Jennifer Young explores the basis of the magazine, its progression and the student involvement in the project.

Orb began as a collaboration between Creative Writing and Computer Science at the University of Hertfordshire. In 2005, I had plans to create a literary magazine with undergraduate students when I received an e-mail from a colleague in Computer Science, Steve Bennett, asking if I might consider creating a publication using digital technologies, and I agreed. After winning funding from our university’s Blended Learning Unit as well as from the English Subject Centre, we trialled a few ideas with the second-year poetry module before deciding to create the magazine in the virtual world of Second Life.

Inside Second Life readers, in the form of avatars, can literally walk around and interact with our words, hear our voices and see us reading our work. The island space in Second Life was purchased and managed by Steve Bennett, David Kraithman and their team, and Kieren Stokes, a recent University of Hertfordshire Computer Science graduate, designed the Orb site. The decision was that the main stage would face the end of the island, so the ocean backed the main stage. Viewing platforms were created around the main stage, which display the published pieces. Extra features were created, such as feedback spaces beneath the published pieces, writeable walls where visitors can add their own poetry, a literature quiz and free shirts. The writeable poetry walls have proved to be very popular with visitors to the site, with most contributing a new piece of poetry. Much of the feedback received relates to the poetry walls and free shirts. Stokes created the code to enable these features, as the ‘writeable’ features are not a normal part of Second Life programming. The writeable wall is limited to poetry at the moment, and work is being undertaken to allow the site to preserve the contributions.

Issue one
A call for editorial staff was distributed during the induction week of 2006-2007. Over 50 students wanted to join, which was far too many to be feasible. We asked all of the students to write a page of A4 explaining why they wanted to be on the staff. 18 people formed the final group, with people from all three years of undergraduate study.

Students from both the School of Humanities and the School of Business joined the staff. Two marketing students from Business were invaluable with early ideas for promoting the magazine. A first-year Humanities student, Jules Foreman, named the magazine Orb, which matched the ‘space’ theme of the other university publications – Satellite and Universe. Laura Stewart, a second-year student, created the Orb logo, which Ray Burnside, of ElstreeDV, designed from Stewart’s sketches.

Despite the delayed launch of the magazine’s first issue, from May to October 2007, seven stalwart students worked over the summer. They came to meetings on campus and in London, communicated by e-mail and the university’s Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), StudyNet and helped to get the magazine launched on 23 October.

The first issue published works by 11 UK university students and received 125 submissions. The launch
The launch was simultaneously streamed into the Second Life site and, although ‘live stream’ is a familiar phenomenon these days, it required an immense amount of effort from many people. We had some technical glitches – all of our tests failed to work on the day of the launch, but during the actual event streaming worked perfectly. The launch was filmed live in the auditorium by technicians Lucy Bolton and James Scutt. The video was fed to an Apple computer running Quicktime Broadcaster and subsequently to a Darwin media server, (this was done with the assistance of Johann Siau, Senior Lecturer in the School of Electronic, Communication and Electrical Engineering, and Steve Bennett.) The live feed was then played inside Second Life on a video screen ‘in world.’ Brett Lucas, of the English Subject Centre, stepped in at the last minute to virtually ‘build’ the video screen for the display, as our designer had left for a teaching post in Japan by the end of the project. Our audience was small but appreciative and they responded well to both the magazine and Agbabi’s reading.

**Issue two**

Again, Orb had large numbers of interested students to form the staff, although the majority of them wanted to serve as the co-editors. The members of staff for the second issue were younger than for the first issue, with no third year student involvement at all. It is believed this relates to a change in curriculum. Without the grant funding to pay for an external website builder for the second issue, the University of Hertfordshire Second Life campus team, led by campus manager Dave Lee, graciously took on the technical aspects of Orb. There are plans to move the Orb island geographically closer to the university’s main island within Second Life. With this transition, the university would like the Orb site to reflect similar construction styles, textures and overall appearances to the university site, which replicates much of the real-life University campus. If implemented in subsequent issues, this will contrast with the playful imaginary garden feel the Orb site currently has.

For the second issue, Orb received 130 submissions, which came from a wider array of UK universities than the first issue. The second issue published works by 10 UK university students, which included the first piece of drama and the first repeat author, Rob Pringle, who had poetry published in both issues. The second issue was launched on 29 April 2008, in the Weston Auditorium, with student readings.

**Student involvement**

The nature of the student body of the university has made an impact on the progress of both issues. Many of the student staff for both issues have lived off campus and commuted in for classes. Most students have worked multiple days a week, which made the traditional extra-curricular time slot of Wednesday afternoon difficult for meetings. With low student numbers at most meetings, decisions were not being made. As a solution, the students began to use MSN Messenger for real-time discussions, as they were all already familiar with it. In addition, an Orb group was created on StudyNet (the university’s in-house VLE), where submission files were posted for staff to review. These solutions provided immediate fixes for the face-to-face meeting problems.
The high number of students who work while doing their courses has definitely impacted on the participation in Orb. Enthusiasm has been high at the start of both issues, but the reality of finishing coursework, keeping up with reading and working has forced many excellent students to drop out of the project. For both issues, core groups of active students emerged out of the original large staff.

The second issue had a much shorter production time, as launch for the first issue in October necessitated a later starting date for staff recruitment. The staff for the second issue seemed to maintain less enthusiasm for the project, perhaps lacking the thrill of the ‘new’ that had driven the first staff. The smaller number of active students became an issue, as some staff members wanted to wait until everyone had voted on final submissions. Eventually, decisions were reached within the smaller group of students.

The Second Life campus team have offered to create a newly designed Orb site for each issue, with screen shots archived of all the old issues. My concern with this idea is the length of time it takes for students to agree on the choice of submissions for the magazine, much less a complete new visual style each year. The choice for a visual style would have to begin before the pieces of Creative Writing were selected, so the site would inevitably reflect the personal preferences of the editorial staff, rather than the content of the published Creative Writing.

No one in the staff of the second issue had Second Life technical expertise. Recruiting Computer Science students to participate has been a problem for both issues, probably because they are based on another campus. Until student expertise is available, the project will continue to use the assistance of the university’s Second Life campus team.

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The project has resulted in a higher profile for Creative Writing at the University of Hertfordshire.

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The future of Orb

After two years with the majority of the work being completed by a small number of student staff members, for the 2008/2009 issue, Orb will start with a smaller staff. I consulted with Mimi Tessier, lecturer in Mass Communications at the University of Hertfordshire, and the audience at the English Subject Centre’s Creative Writing: Teaching and Technology conference in Manchester, in April 2008. Everyone recommended a smaller staff of three students. It is hoped that a smaller staff will result in a higher level of responsibility from the students. The School of Humanities has also implemented a zero-credit work module, which allows students to receive a non-weighted module listed on their official transcripts to show their participation with extra-curricular projects.

What does an interactive, virtual-world-based magazine provide that other web-based magazines do not? The creation of the magazine in the virtual world provides an alternate way to publish work, and it allows students to enhance the presentation of their writing through audio and images. Orb has a large international audience through the use of the Second Life platform.

The project has resulted in a higher profile for Creative Writing at the University of Hertfordshire, as well as strong interest in the use of the virtual world of Second Life for publishing a magazine. Student editors have gained valuable experience and increased their employability skills. Two of the four editors for the first issue, Rosey Collins and Emma Filtness, have gone on to MA-level study in Creative Writing. With strong support from the School of Humanities and the University of Hertfordshire, Orb has a successful future ahead. We look forward to the ideas of the 2008/2009 student editorial staff. Orb can be accessed at http://slurl.com/secondlife/SMIRKworld/163/76/25

A Student’s View of Orb

Editing Orb could be hard work, but it was always enjoyable, and it was great to learn a bit about how a magazine is run. As a writer, before working on Orb I had never even tried to imagine what became of a piece of writing once it was submitted to a publication. To be on the other end of that process was fascinating; submissions can be debated over for weeks, and accepted and rejected several times before a final decision is made. Wading through the process with other members of the editorial team has given me at least some idea of what editors might snap up immediately, what they might um and ah over and what they are likely to reject out of hand.

Practical benefits aside, it is always satisfying to work with a group of people to create something unique and spectacular. Our hard work paid off, and I still have fond memories of the launch of the first issue, which really enhanced those feelings of shared smugness and pride. It was a great night, and a fitting climax to all of our efforts.

Rosey Collins
Managing Editor, Orb Issue 1

From left to right: Contributors to the first issue Ella Reeves, Martin Jeyes, Polly Orchard and Rosey Collins. Jeyes and Collins both worked as editors for the magazine. Polly Orchard, from the University of Southampton, read her piece ‘Little Match Stick Girl’ at the launch.
Creative Writing: Teaching and Technology
30 April 2008

Jess Edwards hosted this event at Manchester Metropolitan University. It was the first English Subject Centre event to focus on the different ways we are using technology to teach Creative Writing, and it proved to be quite popular. In short, 10 minute, presentations we learned how colleagues are using mixtures of cutting edge and everyday technology to help their students create incredible work.

We saw demonstrations of PowerPoint poetry (Judy Kendall, Salford) and text message poetry (Nigel McLoughlin, Gloucestershire). We saw a student literary magazine that is interactive and lives in the virtual world of Second Life (Jennifer M. Young, Hertfordshire, see pp. 28-30). We learned how colleagues use their VLEs for writing exercises, critique circles and creative-critical assignments (Candi Miller, Jackie Pieterick and Rosie Miles, Wolverhampton). Two panel discussions about distance learning Creative Writing degrees (Lancaster and Manchester Met), presented case studies of the challenges (both institutional and practical) of building and sustaining an online degree programme. The day drew to a close with a plenary discussion which pointed to possible topics for future events, such as: Does online/distance learning place unusual demands on students? How do departments address the invisibility of distance learners and distance tutors? Is there a digital divide in the UK and if so how is it configured?

Want to know more? Further details and session abstracts can be found at
www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/events/event_detail.php?event_index=178

Videos of most sessions can be viewed on our website’s Media Player at
www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/archive/mediaplayer/player.html

WikiOmeros

The context for this project is the first-year Epic Tradition module in our English Department, in which we teach The Iliad, The Odyssey, The Aeneid and Paradise Lost. In recent years, we have concluded with Omeros (1990) by Derek Walcott, which contains very dense allusions to the other epic texts, and deals centrally with the conflict between a classical education and an upbringing in the West Indies. However, there is a lack of supporting material for this highly literary and allusive poem: the only edition, published by Faber, contains no notes or commentary. The aim of the project is to produce a student-led collaborative commentary run on the wiki principle. By contributing glossaries, intertextual references, historical and biographical notes, students will develop their skills in close reading, comparison of texts and scholarly debate while providing a resource to all others who wish to study Omeros. The commentary will be web-based and accessible by any institution, student or scholar. The completed project will also provide a model for other lecturers on how to create a commentary on a text that is interactive and student-led. This project, at Warwick University, is being led by Elizabeth Clarke and co-ordinated by Amanda Hopkins.

For more details and information on this, and all English Subject Centre projects, go to the Project pages of our website
www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/index.php
The relationships between creative practice and critical understanding are complex. So, how do Creative Writing students develop critical knowledge? What kind of critical knowledge is this? And how is this critical knowledge similar to, or different from, the kinds of critical knowledge found in the study of completed texts? Graeme Harper explores the answers in an English Subject Centre project.

Critical Responsive Understanding

1 This project began with a discovery. This discovery appeared to be as important as it was simple. The discovery was this: that university students of Creative Writing were not the same as university students of English. Students of Creative Writing appeared to read with different intentions, for different results, and they did so in a way that was not always recognised by their English tutors. There was, in lay terms, some kind of ‘mismatch’, something in the process of developing and exchanging knowledge between the subjects of English and Creative Writing that was going awry. Students of English treated as if they were students of Creative Writing were not always benefitting from their university experience, and students of Creative Writing, treated as if they were students of English, were likewise missing out on something. But what was it?

The first forward steps in this project were, thus, taken around the relatively expansive notion of exploring the relationship between the subjects of ‘English’ and ‘Creative Writing’. And the initial, more specific, observation was simply that the understanding and knowledge at play among either English or Creative Writing students was not of poorer comparative kind, but that it was different. These were not, as such, weaker ‘creative’ students or weaker ‘literary criticism’ students – though this was the shorthand often used if, as was reasonably common, they were performing better in one or other part of their university studies.

To present a somewhat typical example: these were students who might score a 78 on a piece of creative work and a 53 on a literature-focused essay, or vice versa. Often, the ‘intelligence’ of the strongest students in either of these subjects was entirely obvious, in the way they approached higher learning, in their willingness to explore ideas, in their capacity to shift planes of reference. But the Creative Writing student’s ability to engage with a set of critical ideas that asked them to respond to ‘completed’ English texts or the English student’s ability to produce and consider creative works in progress was not the same.

All this, of course, is anecdotal, and the control groups, if there could be said to be any, were those encountered on what is now, frighteningly, 25 years of teaching Creative Writing students in English departments, in departments of Creative Studies, Media and Film, Creative and Performing Arts – at BA, MA and PhD level, in the UK, Australia and the US. A quarter of a century of thinking: ‘something is not right here’. Perhaps it takes its toll!

The clue to ensuring the success of this English Subject Centre project largely appeared to be in how one or other set of students responded to the tasks around them: tasks of reading and tasks of writing. Creative Writing students did so in a different way to those studying English, and they did so in a way that drew on the natural processing activity occurring when anyone (student or not) is engaged in high-pressure activity, deadlines, or work that will be assessed by others. Certainly, English students did appear to be able to train themselves to be better students of Creative Writing, and Creative Writing students could become better students.
of English – but the students who interested me most were those who were not willing to train themselves. I was also particularly interested in those students who felt enlivened by Creative Writing in a way that the ‘post-event’ study of completed works in English did not seem to enliven them. By post-event, I mean ‘after the production of the text’; thus, focusing on completed works, largely written by others (regardless of any complications we might see in this word ‘completed’). These were students who were likely to respond ‘I’m doing Creative Writing’, if asked what degree programme they were pursuing, even if they were combining Creative Writing with other subjects, such as English.

None of these initial observations equated entirely with any notions of ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’. Rather, they appeared to be about human dispositions. These were individuals who – if it doesn’t murder the language too brutally – had an ‘epistemological disposition’ toward creative practice as their primary outreach, and a critical understanding that worked best when it fluidly informed this disposition. I called this kind of understanding critical responsive understanding. Critical responsive understanding is a kind of critical understanding that responds to a need. In the case of the creative writer, that need is to produce their next work of Creative Writing – whether poem, story, screenplay or otherwise. It is responsive because it is responding to this need with a degree of critical and creative openness that means it is difficult to harness to one of the shiny buggies of modern, Western university education. Or, in other words, it is not usefully served by our long-held tendency towards departmentalisation.

Creative writers, using their responsive understanding to the fullest of their abilities, draw on whatever fields of structured knowledge that exist around them and, indeed, as evidence would come to prove on this project, they often draw on vast areas of unstructured knowledge in ways that defy any university structuring (or, at least, that kind of structuring prevalent in the West during the previous century). The fact is, we might not even have come to notice this kind of responsive understanding had the cultural moment not moved on from that seen in the vast majority of the 20th-century when we witnessed increased university ‘departmentalisation’, built on the foundations of exploring ‘scientific’ specialisms. Here in the 21st-century, the sense of interrelation is already far stronger, with many universities in the UK actively encouraging what is referred to as ‘cross-college/department’ or ‘cross-institution’ collaboration, and even those research councils that fund academics talk increasingly about the importance of ‘cross-disciplinary’ research. New technologies, most of them launched from the early 1990s onwards, have emphasised such connectivity and brought about new modes of human exchange. Just think of the mobile phone, the computer game, the Internet and World Wide Web. These are technologies of our cultural moment.

The English Subject Centre Critical Responsive Understanding project began with a series of seminars in London, followed by others in Bangor, Oxford and Norwich, and it incorporated video-linked seminars to the US and Australia.

The majority of people involved in the seminars were actively engaged with the subject of Creative Writing, as either staff or students. However, in Oxford and in London, there were also participants whose principle work was in the subject of English. To keep this exchange balanced, seminars were organised by myself (a specialist in Creative Writing) and by Dr Samantha Rayner (whose doctoral background is in English).

Seminars focused on different aspects of the English-Creative Writing exchange, but the primary interest was in exploring types and styles of critical understanding. To take some contrasting examples: the British Library seminar (April 2007) looked at the artefacts of Creative Writing and how these were represented in culture, and the ways in which critical apparatuses have been built up around certain aspects of these artefacts. The relative importance of fame in defining what has been, or has not been, preserved as part of our literary heritage was explored during this seminar. Likewise, the seminar looked at how our preferences for certain styles, presentations or modes of dissemination had brought to the fore certain kinds of writerly texts and responses to them. A discussion was also launched around the Creative Writing process, and there was an extensive exploration of how any act of Creative Writing not only potentially produces a core, final work, but also produces preliminary works, complementary works and post-works (such as reviews and critical articles, writers’ letters to friends and publishers).

The British Library seminar contrasted with the international video conference, co-ordinated at Bangor (October 2007), and with the seminar at Oxford Brookes University (April 2008). The international video conference looked more widely at knowledge in the subject of Creative Writing, and considered how this knowledge compared and contrasted with the knowledge in the subject of English. Participants included members of staff and students from West Georgia University (USA), Bangor University, the University of Bedfordshire, Flinders University (Australia) and the University of Gloucestershire.

And so the comparisons continue: in New York (January 2008), discussions focused on understanding rather than knowledge, and considered how understanding involved both certain acts/actions, thoughts and, indeed, critical positions. This seminar, involving around 40 members of the Creative Writing community from the UK and USA, highlighted how the subjects of English and Creative Writing were developing at various points in their national histories, while the subject of Creative Writing was beginning to communicate more frequently internationally, in a way that now matched the international communications in the subject of English.

Graeme Harper is Professor of Creative Writing, and Director of Research, in the College of Arts and Humanities, at Bangor University. He is Chair of the NAWE Higher Education Committee and edits the journal New Writing. His latest works are, as Brooke Biaz, Moon Dance (Parlor, 2008) and, as Graeme Harper, The Creative Writing Guidebook (Continuum, 2008).
Creative Pedagogies

In Norwich (November 2007), the seminar looked more closely at acts of practice, and largely involved students of Creative Writing, from undergraduate and postgraduate courses; while in Oxford, where Professor Rob Pope played a key role and where many participants had backgrounds in the study of English, the seminar focused on responsiveness, ideas about the nature of creativity and the purposes and trajectories of contemporary criticism.

The original proposal for ‘Responsive Critical Understanding: extending the possibilities in the relationship between English and Creative Writing’ defined the direction of the project well, throughout. However, because in the initial seminars the participants were largely in agreement that the disciplines of ‘English’ and ‘Creative Writing’ were different, but related (this often depended upon on which genre of Creative Writing was being considered), additional discussions around critical understanding, and responsive criticism, were later included, to encourage further explorations of what the relationship between the two disciplines entails.

These discussions then informed a presentation at the English Subject Centre Renewals conference, in July 2007, where a large audience for a session, conducted by Graeme Harper and Graham Holderness (who was not part of the project, but presented work on creative-critical writing), were engaged with ideas of process-based knowledge and post-production knowledge. Of particular interest to that audience, were notions of pre-texts, complementary texts and post-texts – that is, works made before, during and after the core Creative Writing.

At sessions in London in April 2007, participants were keen to explore actual writing acts and actions – noting that much of what they did as creative writers was not recorded, and that much of it would not be considered, necessarily, to be worthy of ‘literary study’. Discussions here adopted a fairly teleological ethos, concentrating on the Creative Writing acts that contributed to the goal of completing one or other writing project. On the other hand, in Oxford, discussions ranged more widely across the approaches that might be taken to the idea of a ‘final’ creative product, with participants eager to emphasise that the question of what was a ‘completed’ work was itself highly vexed. In Norwich, questions of what constituted ‘discipline-focused’ teaching and learning were raised, with quite a number of the Creative Writing students present (BA- and M-level) not having a background in English – many of them having linked to visual arts subjects.

Many of the project seminars – whether live or by video link – were recorded as notes, directly onto a laptop, or onto flipcharts or, occasionally, on whiteboards (and transcribed later). Different venues initiated different approaches. For example, at the Norwich venue (in the conference centre of Norwich’s city centre site called ‘The Forum’, which also houses the city library, regional offices of the BBC and a range of stores), discussions were more free-form, and the interactions more like a public lecture and discussion. In Oxford, discussions were more like a seminar: with a formal presentation and structured questions and answers based on PowerPoint slides. At the Swedenborg Centre in Bloomsbury (the venue for two London events), a workshop approach was taken, with participants working in smaller groups and then opening up their discussions. Broad topic areas defined each of the events, such as ‘acts and actions of Creative Writing’, ‘the nature of critical understanding in Creative Writing’, ‘varieties of practice/varieties of criticism’, ‘types and roles of theoretical analysis’, ‘the nature of Creative Writing experience’, ‘the place of the writer in culture’, ‘the institution and the creative writer’, ‘the history of Creative Writing and English in universities’, ‘practice-led research’ and ‘kinds of understanding and the nature of Creative Writing knowledge’.

Participants noted such things as:

‘Creative Writing is about the practice of writing.’
‘There is a body of knowledge about Creative Writing that is not always easily shared in universities at present.’

After what became around 18 months of seminars, discussions and occasional readings (used as starting points for discussion), the results were as lively as they were thought-provoking. Of particular importance were the following:

- Creative Writing students and staff felt that their engagement in acts and actions of practice involved a wide range of critical understanding and a considerable breadth of knowledge. Not all of this, they felt, was contained in what some universities currently call the study of English.
- English staff and students recognised that an informed understanding of Creative Writing practice was certainly valuable, but felt some aspects were not necessarily avenues for easy exploration through the university subject of English, and made particular note of changes in critical or theoretical perspectives over the last 50 years that had sometimes helped the exploration of Creative Writing and sometimes hindered it, particularly in relation to the place and significance of ‘the author’.
- Both subject groups felt they could gain from continuing to talk to each other. However, both also recognised that universities allowed for the exchange of ideas and knowledge across a vast range of subjects, and that such broad areas as ‘the creative arts’ might have important relationships to build with the subject of Creative Writing, while other areas in the Humanities might have important relationships with the subject of English, all of which might benefit from additional exploration.
- Creative writers outlined in some seminars those kinds of things they do in their day-to-day lives as writers that did not seem to be the subject of critical study from within the subject of English.
- English specialists noted some aspects of their critical understanding that helped to inform their analysis of texts and contexts, but did not seem to relate directly to how authors might personally view their acts and actions.
- ‘Appreciation’ was a word that featured in a number of discussions,
and both staff/students of English and those of Creative Writing made a point of showing appreciation for the perspectives and approaches adopted by their alternate-subject colleagues, while maintaining the considerable importance of their autonomy.

- Finally, the notion of responsiveness was extensively explored and was seen as a potential way of defining the activities of both groups and, perhaps, of encouraging both groups to see their subjects as engaging with the world in specific ways.

The project revealed a great deal about the ways in which we assume certain knowledge is, or isn’t, valid in universities and about how we develop our levels of understanding. It added some flesh to the bones of an idea: the idea that English and Creative Writing can operate in a collaborative way without absorbing one subject into the other or, indeed, without suggesting critical knowledge of creative activity is contained only in post-event analysis, or creative knowledge only contained in practice-led activities. Continued discussion between the National Association of Writers in Education and the English Subject Centre is adding further weight to such positive collaborative enterprises.

Further Information http://nieci.bangor.ac.uk/recrun/www.nawe.co.uk

Teaching, Theory & Practice

Many of us who teach Creative Writing find ourselves asking: Are there theories of Creative Writing? If so, what are they? What constitutes knowledge and research in Creative Writing? Why do we teach the way we do? What skills do we teach our students? Creative Writing and Pedagogic Research: how do they fit together? This project is about creating an online resource to explore these ideas and provide some answers, all contributed by Creative Writing teachers in higher education. The objectives are to provide an introduction to the theoretical aspects of Creative Writing pedagogy for those who are not yet familiar with it; to increase the knowledge of those who are and to encourage further debate in general. The resource will include peer-reviewed articles, book reviews, practitioner interviews, a discussion forum and helpful links to other sites, online articles and resources to help colleagues reflect on their own teaching practice. It will be part of the English Subject Centre website and will include links to the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE). This project, at the University of Gloucestershire, is being led by Nigel McLoughlin.

For more details and information on this, and all English Subject Centre projects, go to the Project pages of our website www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/index.php

Teaching: An Improviser’s Art

1 May 2008

Kevin McCarron, a lecturer in American Literature at Roehampton University, also works as a stand-up comic. In April and May, under the auspices of the English Subject Centre, he met with groups of lecturers in Sheffield and London, where he discussed what techniques can be usefully transferred from the comedy club stage to the seminar classroom and, crucially, how the daring lecturer can reduce some of the stress and time connected to class preparation. Surprisingly, McCarron did not advocate that academics become masters of the one-liner. To the contrary, he highlighted what these two professions share in common: both ‘have the ability to expose people to the big issues of life,’ he remarked. Both comics and lecturers need to think flexibly, though lecturers are hardly ever taught to do so ‘on the spot.’ By the close of the day, McCarron had suggested a number of ways we might improve our teaching practice by borrowing from stand-up comedy: stop opening class with administrative information – could anything be more boring? Save such details for the end of class. Place a very high value on your opening lines: start with something that will grab their attention – a provocative question always works well. McCarron’s ideas resonated with many new lecturers when he acknowledged the reason academics often over-prepare is because of our inordinate fear of ‘being caught out’ by a student and our scholarly sense that there is always more knowledge to be had ‘out there’ and it is our responsibility to get it. Such an approach could not be more wrong, we were told, because it confuses our scholar selves with our teacher selves. In the classroom, it’s not our job to have read a specific book; it is to help the students in front of us make sense of it.

Want to know more? View Kevin’s London presentation on our website’s Media Player at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/archive/mediaplayer/player.html

You can also read ‘Wisdom and Wit’, an article about Kevin and this event, by Tariq Tahir, published in Times Higher Education at www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=402165&sectioncode=26
Creative Pedagogies

English Degrees in Further Education Colleges: what are the issues?

Candice Satchwell reviews some of the issues in delivering English degrees in further education colleges, including perspectives from lecturers and students.

Background

A small but significant – and growing – number of degrees in English are currently taught in further education (FE) colleges. Although the staff are on FE contracts, they are teaching at higher education level (HE), and the English Subject Centre is keen to recognise the special circumstances of those lecturers at the same time as embracing them as higher education practitioners in the English subject community.

As HE in FE Project Officer for the English Subject Centre, I have been investigating some of the characteristics of this provision. This has included obtaining perspectives from tutors, students and management. Because higher education provision in colleges is often linked to a nearby university, there is also the perspective of the higher education institution (HEI) to consider. This article gives a flavour of some of my findings to date, and an idea of some future directions to pursue.

The government’s White Paper ‘The future of higher education’ (January 2003) stated that it aims to get 50% of 18–30 year olds to experience higher education by 2010. The Department for Children, Schools and Families estimated that the participation rate in 2005/2006 was around 43%. In particular, the government is keen to enable participation from the following groups:

- Mature students
- Young students from social classes 4–7 and/or in low participation areas
- Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students
- Students with disabilities

Given that further education colleges take the majority of their students from these groups, they are ideally situated to contribute to the widening participation agenda. As a consequence, universities have cultivated relationships with colleges in their vicinity to help them meet their widening participation targets as set by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

Many of the HE courses at FE colleges are vocational in nature, and the majority of the HE provision across all subjects is in the form of Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) or Foundation Degrees (FDs). Although English is not commonly viewed as a vocational curriculum area, there are a handful of FDs offered in English, with a distinctive work-based element built in. A recognition of the benefit to employers and the development of innovative work experience opportunities in these programmes suggests that these models might pave the way for more FDs in English. However, in my search for English degrees in further education colleges, I have come across a number of full degrees offered by colleges, with varying amounts of input from their validating university.

Candice Satchwell

Candice Satchwell teaches English on the BA (Hons) English Language, Literature and Writing at Blackpool & The Fylde College where she specialises in stylistics, literacy studies and children’s literature. She is also an honorary research fellow in the Literacy Research Centre at Lancaster University. Her most recent publication, co-authored with R. Ivanic, is: ‘The textuality of learning contexts in UK colleges’, Pedagogy, Culture & Society, Vol. 15, No. 3, October 2007.
So far I have come across the following models for degrees in FE colleges:

- Outreach model: a university degree programme delivered by university staff in a FE college. For example, Liverpool Hope University has a longstanding relationship with a ‘Network’ of outlying colleges, to which an English lecturer will travel weekly to deliver intensive sessions including the equivalent of lecture, seminar, workshop and tutorial.

- Franchise model: a university degree programme, taught by college staff in the first year, then at the HEI in the second and third years. For example, students at Furness College in South Cumbria can take the first year of a Combined Honours degree locally and then move to the University of Central Lancashire to complete.

- Full degree delivery: a full degree designed and taught by further education staff in an FE college – with support from the validating university. For example, Blackpool & The Fylde College delivers a BA (Honours) degree in English Language, Literature and Writing and a Foundation Degree in Communications at Work, both validated by Lancaster University.

Interviews with English lecturers in HE in FE settings have revealed a number of issues, some of which are discussed below.

**‘Here I am again’ or ‘You really get to know your students’**

Lecturers in FE colleges often have diverse teaching loads. Not only are they likely to be teaching a range of levels, from adult literacy classes to GCSE to A Levels or equivalent; they are also likely to be covering a range of subject areas. One tutor described how she taught the English strand of a first year of a franchised Combined Honours degree almost single-handedly, as well as part of the Education Studies strand; while the same content delivered at the university which validated the course would be taught by a team of approximately 10 individuals, each with their own specialism. In addition, this tutor – as many tutors in FE colleges – had previously taught several of the degree students at level 2 and level 3. There are cases, therefore, where the same tutor has taught a student English for up to six years, often almost single-handedly, across English language, literature and Creative Writing. This picture was repainted many times in my interviews with lecturers, leading to us identifying the ‘Here I am again …’ syndrome.

Of course, there are several sides to this. On the negative side, implications might include that the student can become ‘institutionalised’ – set in the ways of the college, producing work which receives high marks from individual tutors, and remaining within the parameters of tutors’ knowledge and understanding. At the same time, a lecturer is required to be ‘a Jill of all trades’ with the consequent concern, often expressed by Jill herself, that she is true mistress of none. With little time to prepare – a typical timetable in FE is 24 hours a week teaching time, regardless of level – and even less time to research, the content of modules may not be based on the latest developments in the area, and may not include technological innovations which take time to develop and implement.

On the other hand, ‘you really get to know your students’. It is often an individual tutor who has inspired a love of English in a student – after all, if they are going to pursue it for six years they must have had a good experience of the subject. Students interviewed often named a tutor who had fostered their love of English, and often this tutor was still involved in their education. For many students in FE, a lack of confidence is a significant issue, and the high level of support enabled by small groups of students and familiar teachers is paramount to their eventual success.

This close relationship between tutor and student is frequently cited as an extremely positive aspect of teaching HE in FE. Students and tutors gave it as the most rewarding characteristic of their teaching, and part of the reason for the high success rates. Some of the staff interviewed had completed the degree themselves, and were now working alongside their original tutors, having completed PGCEs and enrolled on MAs. Without that initial relationship with a tutor, they may never have embarked on the course at all.

**Highlights For Tutors:**

“Seeing students with non-conventional entry criteria blossom and grow, and do well on their degrees. The older students have a lot to offer in seminars and in their writing, and the younger ones benefit from this.”

“Seeing someone who starts in September, terrified, succeed and get a good mark. Those who find it a challenge are the most rewarding.”

“I can’t tell you how rewarding it is – how appreciative students are of the experience they’ve had. It really makes a difference to their lives. I know that’s a cliché, but it does.”

**Comments From Students:**

“The tutors here are marvellous – they’ve always got time for you. It’s like a family really.”

“All the tutors have been brilliant, absolutely brilliant … I’m really grateful. I feel the tutors are a really good sort of bunch all together you know, we get help and we get feedback and I think it’s brilliant the way the course is run, it’s just perfect.”

“The students here don’t know how lucky they are … at [another university] it was terrifying – the numbers of students and no help for mature students.”

External examiners frequently report on the high standard of students’ work in FE settings. Teaching styles which include small group work and a more relaxed mixture of seminar, lecture and workshop elements within each two- or three-hour
session contribute to students gaining in confidence, feeling able to ask questions and seek clarification and advice, which, in turn, lead to high levels of comprehension and analysis, and high standards of work. In terms of learner support systems, and teaching and learning strategies:

“There is much that universities can learn from FE colleges, whose ‘traditional’ students may be ‘non-traditional’ HE candidates” (LSDA, 2003).

For many college students this is their only opportunity to take a degree. Students are often more mature both in age and life experience; they often have jobs and/or families and there may be issues which prevent them from travelling away to study, including financial, social, cultural or other personal considerations. One student taking his degree at his local college where he had done his A Levels said he felt sorry for his friends who had left home and gone to traditional universities. He loved his course, was a dedicated student and appreciated the value of the small group and the relationships with tutors. Several of his friends – from similar backgrounds to him – were struggling with the anonymity they were experiencing, the lack of contact with tutors and the large groups in lectures and seminars. He also mentioned that he was financially better off through not needing to have a student loan and live away from home. Another student in the group had also done A Levels at the same institution. She had been a reluctant and sometimes obstructive student as a teenager, but the college had not given up on her, and she was now in the second year of the degree, with the prospect of gaining a good level of qualification on completion. As a reformed and committed degree student, she said, “I know it sounds sad, but I love college.”

**Language and literature blends**

An interesting aspect of colleges writing their own degrees is how a small team of English specialists arrives at a coherent and attractive programme of study. The process inevitably gives rise to discussions of ‘what constitutes English’ ‘what students want’; and ‘how to combine the elements’.

With reference to the QAA’s Benchmark Statement for English, lecturers are able to devise highly innovative combinations of English language, literature and Creative Writing, which in a large university would be very difficult to co-ordinate.

As one lecturer described the process:

> “The English degree was unusual in conception and development. We sat for a long time thinking about what we, as English specialists, would like to do as a degree? We’d like to know how the language works; we’d like to see people using it really well and we’d like to have a go ourselves. We were very fortunate because we weren’t tied by what was already there, as in a traditional university – all with their own histories. We kept the three strands and worked with them simultaneously. If we looked at something, say metaphor in language, then we’d look at metaphor in literature, and write using metaphors ourselves. (…) Although we’ve blended the three strands together, the individual tutors have retained their subject strengths.”

Students’ responses to the combining of the three strands of language, literature and Creative Writing tend to be very positive:

> “I like them all. I probably like the writing part least, which I suppose is ironic since I wanted to be a journalist. I thought I wouldn’t like the language … but I’ve found it’s my favourite part of the course. It’s good that we are made to do it … I was used to having options [at another university], but I think it’s advantageous that we see a part of it we might not otherwise.”

> “I’ve enjoyed each strand. I’ve found writing the most difficult, and sometimes I’ve failed to see the point of literary theory … Overall it’s very good. The very fact of studying language helps with writing – and the literature has been interesting. It’s broadened my outlook.”

The structure of the degree programme can be seen as restrictive, in that students are given little or no choice. However, students tend not to complain about this; indeed, the comments above indicate that the students can find that they excel in an area they had not previously studied.

**Scholarly activity and research**

For lecturers on HE programmes in FE colleges, the issue of scholarly activity or research arises, not only as a requirement for their teaching, but also from a sense that HE teaching should be accompanied by research. As a HEFCE report (2003) states, however, colleges make no differentiation in pay and conditions for those teaching HE or FE, and although attempts are made to reduce teaching hours to allow for research (or reading) time, “the resulting teaching load would still appear dauntingly high to someone from an HEI!”. The report continues:
“The extent to which necessary staff development can be combined with this commitment is seen as a crucial issue. One HE manager admitted that ‘this is a matter of some resentment because of the additional scholarship and updating of skills to be able to teach at this level’.”

On the other hand, resentment can occur on the part of FE lecturers who are excluded from the experience of teaching HE, and who feel that teaching disaffected 16–19 year olds (and now, increasingly, 14–15 year olds as well) is far more demanding and less rewarding than teaching willing and often highly capable adults. Managers are therefore in a position of pacifying both sides, while unable to reward either sufficiently.

Scholarly activity can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways, but is generally seen as something that does or should accompany teaching in HE.

However, as the quotations below express, in FE the concept of research relates much more closely to teaching than it might do in a research-led university:

“Whatever the interpretation, respondents took pains to stress why these activities took place: ‘they are focused on excellence for our students, not upon establishing the college’s reputation for research’.” (HEFCE, 2003)

“Young (2002) examines lecturers’ perspectives of working in the HE in further education context, and compares their views with those of colleagues in universities. Very succinctly, FE college-based lecturers are seen to have identities characterised by strong commitments to teaching, as distinct from, eg academics or researchers.” (Jones, 2006)

“First and foremost I’m a teacher, not an academic.” (interview with college lecturer)

Final remarks

I have only touched here on some of the issues arising from my work on HE in FE English teaching. There are plenty more people to talk to, and plenty more areas to research, such as issues of access and progression for mature students, further examination of the content of new degree programmes with examples of blending language, literature and writing, and examples of vocational elements in English degrees. After an English Subject Centre Networking Day for HE in FE practitioners, held in London, in June, one thing was clear. While there are differences among the conditions, experiences and expectations of lecturers in a variety of institutions, there are also many similarities, not least a passion for their subject, a dedication to their students and a constant striving for excellence in teaching and learning – and all of these, of course, are characteristics which are also shared by the vast majority of teachers in HEIs of every kind.

Candice Satchwell would welcome opportunities to extend her contacts with HE in FE lecturers, or those in HEIs supervising Outreach arrangements.

More info about HE in FE English can be found on our web pages: www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/further/inde.php

References


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HE in FE Networking Day

13 June 2008

Candice Satchwell reports on the successful networking day she organised at the University of London:

Around 15 colleagues from various parts of the UK came together to discuss experiences – both positive and negative – of teaching English in a higher education (HE) in further education (FE) setting.

Discussion was lively and productive throughout the day, and we covered a wide variety of topics, including: innovative practice in pedagogy and assessment; research and scholarly activity; catering for mature students and those with unconventional routes into HE; support for students – who often require a range of support and support for staff whose time is often taken up in providing it and relationships with validating universities. While we found many aspects of our work common to us all, from our discussions it also emerged how different individual circumstances could be in terms of structuring of institutions, expectations and demands, and also methods of dealing with day-to-day issues. Sharing our different approaches was very fruitful, and we all left feeling we had learned something new to take back to our various institutions. One thing we did have in common was being on FE contracts. It was noteworthy that it was only in the final moments of the day that the issue of pay was raised, even though FE lecturers are paid less than schoolteachers and less than HE lecturers. It seems we were more concerned with our students, and our teaching and learning. We hope that this event will be the first of many which recognise the special circumstances of HE in FE, while also providing an introduction to the mainstream activities of the subject centre which all HE in FE colleagues are welcome to take part in.

A longer report and session details can be viewed at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/events/event_detail.php?event_index=182
Keith Hughes reviews the English Subject Centre’s work in Scotland and looks ahead to the coming year

It is now a year since I was appointed as the English Subject Centre’s Liaison Officer for Scotland; this first year has been challenging and rewarding, with many lessons learned along the way. One of the challenges has been to identify key issues in the subject area in Scotland, and to try to devise ways in which the English Subject Centre can help teachers and students in the English subject area here. This brief article is by way of an introduction to some of the ongoing and future work of the English Subject Centre in Scotland.

Three Scottish-specific areas which we are very keen to develop resources and community interaction in are: (i) the research-teaching nexus, (ii) curriculum design and delivery where joint strands of English and Scottish Literature meet (iii) Higher and their relationship to both A Levels and to university study.

To begin with, the subject of research-teaching linkages. As a current Scottish Enhancement Theme is interested in ‘enhancing graduate attributes through research-teaching linkages’ www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/ResearchTeaching/default.asp, the English Subject Centre felt it would be useful to engage with this from our subject-angle. As teachers in a subject discipline which requires – we would hope! – a level of self-reflexiveness from its students about their own work, surely we too need to welcome the need to pay attention to the ways our teaching practice and our research methods are devised, and particularly the ways in which they interrelate. A one-day event was held in Edinburgh on precisely this theme, and the report can be found on p.41. This is one area of the Scotland-dedicated pages which I will be looking to add to substantially over the coming year as there are more and more useful materials being published in the field.

The second area around which I am keen to focus future English Subject Centre work is that of curriculum design for early years – ie years 1 and 2 – where joint strands of English and Scottish Literature are offered. The four-year undergraduate degree programme here in Scotland has great scope for offering students a relatively deep understanding of the relationships between the two ‘national’ literatures. As a model for an interesting way of breaking through narrowly ‘national’ notions of literature, the dual focus offered in many Scottish universities is worth looking at closely. The title of a 1998 book on the genesis of English studies, edited by Robert Crawford of University of St Andrews, gives an idea of the subversive possibilities of teaching across notional nations boundaries: The Scottish Invention of English Literature. The theoretical and practical possibilities and problems of the dual-literature provision is an area where I hope to make some strides in the year ahead, with a possible colloquium in early summer 2009 at a Scottish university.

The third area which we will be looking to focus on – with materials coming onto our website soon – is the slightly less esoteric subject of Higher. The aim is to serve two principal purposes: first, helping higher education teachers in Scotland – many of whom will themselves not have passed through the Scottish schooling system – understand the variety of texts which first-year Scottish-educated students may have engaged with at school and, secondly, helping colleagues in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, to understand what a Higher is and what students from Scottish schools with this qualification will bring with them to university. The demographic profile of each university in Scotland is of course unique; but all will have a mix of Scottish-educated and other students. We need to recognise – particularly in light of the curriculum design issues mentioned above – the meaning of this difference in terms of the incoming students’ previous exposure to certain texts.

An aside: While waiting to be interviewed for this post last year, I flicked through an English Subject Centre study on A Level English texts, to calm my nerves. One part of the study was an uncluttered listing of ‘texts set for English Literature 2007’: out of around 170 set texts, there were two Scottish writers represented, Scott and Duffy. No Burns, no Lochhead, no Kelman, no Gibbon, no Smollett, no Kay, no Stevenson or Hogg ... So, a student schooled in England will turn up at a Scottish university with almost no knowledge of the literary tradition which will – most probably – form at least a major part of their first two years of study. However, a Scottish-schooled student going to an English university is very unlikely to have had no contact at all with Keats, Austen, Dickens, Barker, Auden, Orwell etc. So, the focus on Highers will, almost necessarily, lead to subsequent discussions on what is being taught at A Level – and the contrast will, almost necessarily, lead to subsequent discussions on what is being taught at A Level – and the contrast between both school and university in Scotland and other parts of the UK. As with all English Subject Centre work, the aim here will be to bring the community together to discuss these issues, to look at the potential benefits and disadvantages which accrue to both students and teachers from these discrepancies/diversities.

As a way of accessing our work in the three fields mentioned above, and more, the English Subject Centre’s website offers a perfect way in. While I am currently engaged in developing materials on the dedicated Scottish pages, there are already plenty of materials on the website generally, which necessarily feed into the
The developments we have planned for the Scottish pages, will look to serve three key functions: (i) to provide information of ongoing developments in the Subject Centre’s work, and further afield (ii) to encourage and enable discussion across the discipline in areas of pedagogical and subject-specific interest and (iii) to promote and facilitate progress in the teaching and study of English, through such things as development in e-learning and sharing of ideas for teaching.

Above all, I see our work in Scotland as community-centred work. That is to say, we are looking to develop a relationship of partners among lecturers, students, researchers – and of course each of us usually at least two of these three! These relationships involve departmental-level contact and engagement, direct work with university teachers, the crucial partnerships with other subject centres (ie those representing other disciplines), the Higher Education Academy for Scotland, and others. As a relatively new recruit of the English Subject Centre, I feel that the exciting developments in English at higher education level – for example, the new joint-degree offered at Napier University in English and Publishing – can lie at the heart of much of our work. The new degrees/departments/universities etc can offer the wider community both a freshness of outlook and can draw on the established higher education English community for important support in matters of collegiate bonding, research-time and so on. The English Subject Centre aims to play a role in helping forge new bonds across the sector.

In common with much of the UK higher education and further education sectors, one of the most exciting, but also potentially difficult, developments that we in Scotland are currently engaging with is the massive growth in recruitment for Creative Writing programmes, and the interesting challenges this throws up for the discipline as a whole. The supposed divide between the study of ‘Creative Writing’ and the study of ‘literature’ – with the almost inevitable adoption of hierarchical views on the relative academic rigour of the two disciplines – is beginning to give way to a fruitful symbiosis in which creative writing teachers are becoming integral members of departments, offering courses which look to cross the literature-creative divide. Indeed, the development of PhD programmes in Creative Writing might prove to be in some ways the most fundamental shift, carrying the imprimatur of ‘research’ as it does. Another, perhaps unforeseen, result of the closer linkage between Creative Writing and literary study is that means of student assessment are themselves being altered by this engagement. The notion of there being other ‘genres’ of assessable writing other than the essay is an emergent issue. As you can see, we in the English subject field – in Scotland or elsewhere – have plenty of issues on our plates at the moment.

One final thought. Without doubt, the growth in e-learning potentialities is helping to break down the seemingly invisible barriers that often exist between not only English, but all of the traditional ‘humanities’, and the scientific disciplines. The growth in e-learning tools and approaches, fostered by university-level demands and the efforts of umbrella bodies such as JISC, is both a challenge and an opportunity for those who work in the English subject area. Scotland’s relatively small, so relatively concentrated higher education sector, could be well-placed to engage with the agenda and drive it forward. The English Subject Centre funds and supports work in the areas of e-learning, and I will be attempting to negotiate my own steep learning curve over the next year in this area, and will welcome fellow travellers. I have had great support throughout my first year from colleagues at the English Subject Centre, and I hope I can successfully bring some of that supportive-ethos to our future work in Scotland.

Quick Guide to Highers and Advanced Highers

For those wishing to enter higher education in Scotland, the school-pathway would usually involve Highers and/or Advanced Highers. Highers are (normally) taken in school year 5, and Advanced Highers in year 6 or at college. Some Scottish universities will allow students with Advanced Highers to enter directly into year 2 of the degree programme. Visit the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) website for more details.

The SQA has also produced a number of case studies on students entering directly into university (including Oxford and Cambridge) through the Advanced Highers route (www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/13813.html)

Teaching and Research in English: Making the Links

13 June 2008

This English Subject Centre event was organised by Keith Hughes, at the University of Edinburgh, and was attended by higher education teachers and postgraduates from across Scotland and England. The event was designed to tie in with the current Scottish Enhancement Theme on the links between teaching and research and the ways in which these links are experienced by students. Vicky Gunn (University of Glasgow) began the meeting with a lively and informative talk on some of the dominant issues surrounding the teaching-research nexus. These included discipline-specific questions, such as; ‘does the learning environment do justice to the discipline?’ and ‘how does/might the learning environment effect the student experience?’ The possibility of inviting undergraduate students to research seminars (at which they might, for example, do a poster display) was mentioned as just one innovative way of getting students involved in ‘research-type’ activities from year 1. Carla Sassi (University of Verona) focused on the personal meaning to her of ‘borders’. Carla talked about the ways in which her sense of her own personal ‘borderline’ identity had become closely involved in her research and teaching of Scottish Literature over the years, and how we ‘invest ourselves’ in our teaching. (Carla Sassi is interviewed in this issue on p.6.) Aileen Christianson (University of Edinburgh) gave a cogent account of the two-way street that is teaching-research. First, Aileen explained how her teaching, and interaction with students, had helped/forced her to create space for research; for example, the paucity of secondary materials on Scottish women writers led her to create such materials. The ensuing discussions with participants introduced ideas relating to Creative Writing, archival work by students and assessment practices.

A longer report and session details can be viewed at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/events/event_detail.php?event_index=181
Book Reviews

The author is not dead, merely somewhere else: creative writing reconceived
Michelene Wandor
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

It’s a truth seldom acknowledged that a writer in possession of a job teaching Creative Writing will not necessarily produce a book on the subject which is both useful and engaging. To this reviewer’s delight, Michelene Wandor has in The author is not dead, merely somewhere else – creative writing reconceived. Wandor’s involvement in the arts (poetry, music and drama) both as student, writer and latterly as Creative Writing teacher suggests she is well qualified to "historicise, theorise, problematise and reconceive" the subject. She does so with gusto, verve and some diverting side swipes: “The term ‘literature’ applied to Creative Writing ‘textbooks’ carries a nice irony” (Wandor, 108).

The book contains a comprehensive history of Creative Writing and its struggles for existence, respectability, inclusion and autonomy. It begins with Creative Writing’s first appearance in the UK at the University of East Anglia, digresses to show similarities between the scepticism greeting its proposal as an academic discipline and that of English literature which suffered similarly in the late 19th-century. Could “‘it’… be taught at all… certainly (it) could not be examined.” (32) and goes on to document Creative Writing and its relationship with literary criticism and literary theory.

Wandor claims that the “book constructs the first history of Creative Writing in formal, higher education in the UK.” (4) It also details educational trends which have influenced Creative Writing teaching, here and in the US and quotes respected Creative Writing pedagogues such as Bishop and Ostrom. Wandor delivers a few memorable lines of her own, such as her riposte to that plaguing poser: What is creative writing?

“It’s a mode of imaginative thought.”

An unquestioning champion of the subject, she isn’t, however, taking Creative Writing to task for its isolationism, its ‘colonising desires and suspicion/hostility towards the intellectual/theory aspects of literary study’ (159). She argues for Creative Writing to be part of the English faculty.

To whom then, might this book be helpful? People like me, I believe – ordinary writer-practitioners with a day job teaching creative writing. Here, for us, is someone who appreciates the potential gaffes and glories of theorising a subject still on shifting pedagogical ground. She appreciates our other difficulty, that there are few among us who have actually been taught how to teach creative writing. Wandor claims there is a ‘virtual absence’ of Creative Writing training in the UK. “Teaching expertise” must come “by osmosis from the workshop experience.”

She makes a case for why “current workshop practice really must go” (218) the thrust of her argument being that Creative Writing pedagogy is “fuelled by the incompatible pairing of the Romantic Muse and coercive self-expression,” and that in traditional workshops the stress is always on what is wrong.” (219). The classes she describes as part of her Creative Writing teaching sound similar in principle to those discussed in Katherine Cole’s essay “The Elephant in the Room” (G. Harper, ed. Teaching Creative Writing 2006: 8) Both of these clearly excellent teachers know that evaluative judgments have no place in a creative writing class or workshop – call it what you will – though their methods for avoiding these, differ. More intriguing for me, was Wandor’s idea of asking every student about their own linguistic background as a way of alerting them to “the range of ‘Englishes’ they possess as the … material for their writing” (214).

My only disappointment with this book is that her methodologies seem to take no account of large-group Creative Writing teaching, a reality for a growing number of teachers. While reconceiving the workshop she might usefully have considered the role of Virtual Learning Environments. Her workshop-less future seems to be technology free.

In most other respects, this is a satisfying examination of Creative Writing in which the astute author’s passion for the subject is evident. I believe the book will be the definitive text about the history of Creative Writing teaching and its development in the UK for some time to come.

Candi Miller
University of Wolverhampton
Creative Writing is in the process of redefining its place in the higher education academy, a process that necessarily involves identifying the subject’s central paradigmatic features and theorising the work it does. Yet creative writers teaching in higher education have, historically, retreated from theory, oftentimes seeing it as little more than an afterthought to the creative process. As a result, there is little evidence to suggest that many Creative Writing teachers are aware of – or remotely interested in – the conversation about using rhetoric and composition’s disciplinary knowledge to develop pedagogies for Creative Writing.

(Re)Writing Craft attempts to address this knowledge gap and revise many of the institutional and conceptual presuppositions that have divided writing teachers by exploring the ‘intersections’ between composition and Creative Writing so that they can become ‘mutually enriching fields of activity and inquiry.’

As someone who came to composition with a background in Creative Writing, Tim Mayers champions the convergence of the two disciplines. The book begins with an examination of the disciplinary boundaries – and their attendant power dynamics – that exist within English departments. It questions Creative Writing’s ‘institutional-conventional wisdom’, the notion that ‘real’ writers cannot be made and therefore the subject must focus on ‘teaching the technical things about writing.’ Mayers argues that Creative Writing’s limited sense of craft as mere technique was adopted from the Romantic opposition of the ‘aesthetics of inspiration’ and the ‘aesthetics of work’, and was further reduced to mechanics within English departments. He contends that the development of the discipline shifts significantly when read through Mayers’ The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880 (which alludes to Saul Bellow’s comment that bringing creative writers into English departments was the equivalent of hiring elephants to teach zoology).

Drawing on the disciplines’ histories and publications by compositionists and creative writers, Mayers then attempts to define ‘craft criticism’ and to distinguish it from literary criticism’s interpretive orientation. According to Mayers, craft criticism is a genre of ‘emergent theoretical scholarship’ arising from Creative Writing teachers’ recognition that their work has been marginalised in the academy, and characterises it as a Bakhtinian ‘speech genre’ – a generative domain concerned more with composing than with interpreting. Its purpose is to improve teaching, but because craft criticism also attends to institutional and social contexts, it redresses the neo-romantic ideology that sets Creative Writing apart in a privileged, yet peripheral, space.

According to Mayers, fiction writers and poets are now expanding craft criticism to articulate theories of process, authorship, genre and institutional context in ways that provide points of convergence with work in composition. To set up a conceptual framework in which discussions of craft in Creative Writing and composition can be usefully read together, Mayers uses Heidegger. These critical explications are then followed by practical proposals for institutional changes to bring writing studies together. He calls for creative writers and compositionists to work together to either set up writing departments or to overturn a disciplinary structure ‘in which textual production tends to be valued primarily as a vehicle for textual interpretation.’ Mayers is quite aware, however, that local politics may preclude such options.

Discussions of craft, like the ones in Mayers’ book, oftentimes lead to an attention to teaching. And teaching provides us with a shared concern that builds broad alliances with others who are concerned with writing, reading and languages – visual and typographic. As a result, (Re)Writing Craft should appeal to an expanded audience. There are, however, some important drawbacks for UK readers. For example, Mayers’ exploration of the disciplinary divides between literature, Creative Writing and composition in US English departments seems misplaced because they are not typically found in the British academy – primarily because the UK curriculum historically, retreated from theory, oftentimes seeing it as little more than an afterthought to the creative process. As a result, there is little evidence to suggest that many Creative Writing teachers are aware of – or remotely interested in – the conversation about using rhetoric and composition’s disciplinary knowledge to develop pedagogies for Creative Writing.

According to Mayers, fiction writers and poets are now expanding craft criticism to articulate theories of process, authorship, genre and institutional context in ways that provide points of convergence with work in composition. To set up a conceptual framework in which discussions of craft in Creative Writing and composition can be usefully read together, Mayers uses Heidegger. These critical explications are then followed by practical proposals for institutional changes to bring writing studies together. He calls for creative writers and compositionists to work together to either set up writing departments or to overturn a disciplinary structure ‘in which textual production tends to be valued primarily as a vehicle for textual interpretation.’ Mayers is quite aware, however, that local politics may preclude such options.

Jackie Pieterick
University of Wolverhampton
The English Subject Centre’s Sixth Annual New Lecturers’ Workshop

21–23 November 2008, Nottingham

Are you in the first or second year of your first full-time post?
Do you teach literature, Creative Writing or English language courses?
Would you like to discuss and develop your teaching with your peers in English studies?

What can you expect?

- Lively debate and dialogue on teaching.
- Space to reflect on and develop your teaching practice.
- Structured sessions on topics such as: close reading, assessment, and lecture and seminar teaching.
- Input from Subject Centre staff and invited guests on pedagogy and research.

The weekend is organised around seminars and practical work in groups and supplemented by invited speakers. There is also an integrated online course component delivered through the English Subject Centre’s VLE (Moodle) prior to the workshop.

Feedback from 2007

‘This was an incredibly useful and relevant course – far more useful than any teaching or research skills training that I have had to date.’

‘The structurally integrated nature of the various separate sessions was very good … I appreciated the sessions on planning seminars and presenting lectures.’

‘The preparation on the VLE was useful in making me think about teaching before coming here, and as a model of what can be done.’

‘The ability to share ideas and practices with colleagues was invaluable.’

For more details or to register, please visit our homepage or contact the English Subject Centre at esc@rhul.ac.uk
The English Subject Centre Report Series

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

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Report no. 13
Teaching Shakespeare: A Survey of the Undergraduate Level in Higher Education

Report no. 12
English at A Level: A Guide for Lecturers in Higher Education

Report no. 11
Living Writers in the Curriculum: A Good Practice Guide
Forty years on, we return to Thomas Wyatt for our Desert Island Texts

In this column, we highlight lecturers and their favourite books. In every issue we will invite someone who is registered in our Directory of Experience and Interests www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/find/colleagues/index.php to highlight their favourite books.

Sign up today, and your desert island texts could feature in the next Newsletter.

Cathy Shrank

**British Library MS Egerton 2711**

Thomas Wyatt is the reason I embarked on postgraduate study and ended up in academia: he produces images and lines which stick in the brain, or make the scalp tingle. This manuscript is the most authoritative witness for many of his poems, as it contains verses written or corrected in his hand. It also offers a tantalising glimpse of the lives of the Harrington family who inherited it: the margins are crammed with the scrawled graffiti of the children (‘George Harrington is a naughty boy’; ‘Mary Harrington loves [...]’) and the traces of Latin and maths homework.

**Complete Oxford English Dictionary**

I use the online version almost daily – it’s an indispensable research tool – but, as a graduate student, I also splurged over £300 on the compact one-volume edition. It now sits in our dining room, available for use when I’m trying to write and am avoiding logging on to the internet so that I don’t succumb to the temptation of checking e-mail. The OED project is all the more impressive when you consider its origins, completed in an age well before computers, with words on small slips of paper – sent in by a huge variety of contributors (including convicted criminals) – sorted into pigeonholes.

**Thomas More, Utopia**

My next monograph is on Tudor dialogue – a genre which encompasses almost any and every topic (from fishing and archery, to political theory and the ‘proper’ behaviour of women). More’s elusive work was a foundational text for Tudor dialogists, one to which writers returned again and again. The profound questions it poses remain pertinent today – such as whether or not you compromise your values in order to make things, if not good, then ‘at least as little bad as possible’.

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Cathy Shrank is Reader in Tudor Literature at the University of Sheffield and author of Writing the Nation in Reformation England, 1530–1580 (Oxford University Press, 2004). Among other things, she has published on travel writing, language reform, ideas of civility, mid-Tudor sonnets and Reformation dialogues. She is currently co-editing The Oxford Handbook to Tudor Literature, 1485–1603 with Mike Pincombe (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
John Speed, *Theatre of Empire of Great Britain*

I love maps, and Speed’s are still, to me, some of the most beautiful there are.

Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*

I’m very grateful that I did a BA (at Cambridge) in which medieval literature was compulsory, not least because it introduced me to this poem, with its intriguing mingling of voices and tones, from the comic and ironic, to the touching and tragic. Like Chaucer’s narrator, you can’t help getting swept up in the love affair between Troilus and Criseyde, as they clasp each other like ‘the swote wodebynde’, even as you know – and have been told – that their liaison is doomed. The cynical, romantic and vindictive threads that later adaptations – by Henryson, Shakespeare or Dryden – pick up are all present here, but held in productive tension.

Charles Dickens, *Tale of Two Cities*

My dad read to me until I was about eleven or twelve, starting (I think) with Beatrix Potter and ending up with Dickens. *The Tale of Two Cities* reminds me of him, but it is also my favourite of Dickens’ novels, from the cadences of that opening chapter (‘It was the best of times; it was the worst of times’) to the last (‘It is a far, far better thing that I do now’). It is a marvelously patterned work (as shown in the quotations here, which bookend the work with an interest in what is best, or better), or through repeated motifs, such as the revolutionary wives (above all, Mme Defarge) knitting, or the Parisian streets stained red with wine/blood. And I like the way in which Dickens has played with the romance formula, by making Charles Darnay’s double – Sidney Carton – the real, tragic hero.

Julia Donaldson, *The Snail and the Whale*

The tale of a snail with an itchy foot, who won’t stay clinging to the ink-black rock. I’ve read this over and over to my two children (now five and three) and don’t tire of it. Donaldson is an amazingly talented children’s author; many of her books (as this one) are also produced in tandem with the illustrator Axel Scheffler. Most of Donaldson’s works use rhyme and alliteration, but this one is particularly satisfying, with its clever internal rhymes and the economy with which Scheffler evokes the different geographic locations to which the whale, and the snail on his tail, travel.

C.S. Lewis, *The Horse and his Boy*

I read the *Chronicles of Narnia* again and again as a child, completely immersed in Lewis’ imaginary world and happily spending hours drawing maps of Narnia (and the seven isles) from memory. I’ve read this recently to my five-year-old, reliving my own childhood as I saw her captured by the magic (she too thinks Aslan is, or should be, real). This was always my favourite of the seven books, if only because the children don’t have to return home at the end of it. Lewis gets a bad press for his overt Christianity (and his seeming hostility towards other religions). As a child, I was blithely unaware of the allegory, and – in Lewis’ defence – the final book in the series, *The Last Battle*, does make a strong plea for religious understanding: as Emeth the Calormene discovers, it doesn’t matter whom you worship, but what you do in their name.

Agatha Christie, *Five Little Pigs*

I’ve a decided penchant for detective stories. This is one of my favourites, mainly because of its use of multiple narrative voices, as Poirot gets each of the ‘little pigs’ to reconstruct the fatal events of a summer 16 years earlier.

Robert Graves, *I, Claudius*

Historical novels are another indulgence. I do think Graves is an underrated novelist. He has a gift for capturing different voices (for example, that of Milton’s first wife, Marie Powell, in *Wife to Mr Milton*). *I Claudius* is eminently readable (and re-readable), Graves’ knack for creating a psychologically believable persona further fuelled by Tacitus’ racy narrative of early imperial Rome, on which he draws.
Neophytes, new entrants and young(ish) lecturers

While in the US a range of advisory and self-help books have long been available to new lecturers, in the UK, it has taken a little longer for this trade in ‘how to’ manuals to take hold. It is only in the past half-decade or so, therefore, that readers have been able to choose from a wide selection of books discussing the challenges of the first few years of a lectureship. Surveying this literature, from the early US publications to more recent and relevant publications by, for example, Wyn Grant and Philippa Sherrington, a curious tendency emerges: uncertainty or even awkwardness as to how to address and describe the intended audience for these books. In the now-dated title of Majorie W. Farnsworth’s The Young Woman’s Guide to an Academic Career, the emphasis is on the relative youth of the new lecturer; this is an impression cemented later in the book when she refers, albeit ironically, to her readers as ‘neophytes’ (1974, p.60). More recent US publications prefer to address ‘early career faculty’ (Battaile & Brown, 2006), while Grant and Sherrington describe ‘new entrants’ and ‘young academics’, although they qualify this to mean ‘under 40’ (2006, p.10).

What’s in a name? Not much it would seem, though this uncertainty about how to describe the new lecturer is, I think, revealing of some of the challenges I have encountered in beginning an academic career. Starting, then, with the notion that new lecturers are young lecturers (or at least lecturers under 40): even if this is, still, just about true, being overly self-conscious about age, and specifically about the lack of a discernable age-gap between oneself as lecturer and the student who has come straight from school to university, is manifestly unhelpful. As one of the interviewees quoted in Grant and Sherrington points out, it is easy to overcompensate for closeness in age or inexperience by asserting a confidence or even arrogance that is detrimental to the creation of a good environment for learning. It is impossible, she points out, to hide inexperience from students: ‘Students know perfectly well that it’s your first job and no matter what you do you’re not going to disguise that’ (2006, p.80). This fact was brought home to me in the round of feedback for last year’s courses. Having taught the same group of students first as a TA and then two years later as a lecturer, I was taken aback to discover that a couple of them had not only noticed my promotion but had registered a marked improvement in my teaching. On recovering from the double shock of being exposed as a new lecturer and metaphorically awarded the ‘most-improved’ prize (synonymous at my primary school with consolation prize), I realised that as a measure of my development over the last three years this probably couldn’t be any better or indeed fairer.

If young lecturer is something of a misnomer, then perhaps ‘new entrant’ might come closer to capturing both the increased professionalisation of academia and the position of the new lecturer within it. I wonder, however, if this doesn’t retain something of ‘neophyte’ insofar as it suggests an initiation into a profession that most new lecturers have already entered, first, as a PhD student and, then, often as TAs, visiting lecturer and fixed-term lecturers. It would now be very difficult to find a real-life equivalent of David Lodge’s 1980s creation Persse McGarrigle, the ‘young lecturer from Limerick’ who has never attended a conference or heard of MLA (1985, p.7). The problem becomes, therefore, how to make prior experience tell without disguising inexperience and thereby foreclosing the opportunity to learn from more experienced colleagues. This is not to say that they have a ‘secret’ to be passed on to the neophyte: the secret of academia is, of course, that there is no secret. What appeared, from my point of view as a graduate student, to be the miraculous ability of a select few academics to effortlessly combine research, teaching and administration, I now realise to have been no such thing; as one colleague put it, even the most efficient and relaxed looking lecturers are like swans – serene and calm to onlookers but working very hard beneath the surface. Nor does initiation into the profession have to mean, as the manuals sometimes imply, a process of rapid disenchantment. Although a study in the US identified the gap between expectation and reality as a key reason for dissatisfaction among new lecturers, dwelling too heavily on the negatives (variously described as loneliness, insecurity, confusion and lack of self-esteem) hardly provides the motivation for conquering the steep learning curve faced in the first couple of years of an appointment (Battaile & Brown, 2006, p.55).

What seems to me to be required, then, is a more flexible approach to the exchange of ideas, to the discussion, in part, of the ‘realities’ of faculty life, but also of teaching techniques, tips for managing workloads and ways of trading-off (balancing feels too optimistic at this stage) teaching against research. Informally, this requires openness on the part of new and not-so-new lecturers to receive and to give advice and criticism: an exchange that I have not always found easy due in part, I suspect, to uncertainty on both sides as to where ‘neowness’ begins and ends. Does it make me an old-hand, for example, that I was a TA
for several years in the same institution as I am now a lecturer, or that I am now at the end of the second year of my lectureship, or that there are now new lecturers who are newer than me? At its best, this uncertainty leads to a sense of shared responsibility between more and less experienced staff members: at its worst, it invokes a petrifying sense that we are all muddling along in the dark together. The New Lecturer conference run by the English Subject Centre provides a more formal opportunity for the discussion of the kind of issues I raise above. As a source of advice and reassurance from other new entrants and more experienced faculty, this forum has a distinct advantage over the published manuals, as it can keep pace with the changing demographic and demands of new lecturers. I question, though, whether in ‘new lecturer’ the English Subject Centre has yet found the perfect collective noun. This is in part because, having been promoted from last year’s conference participant to this year’s columnist, I am wondering if I should relinquish my claim to a newness that I have only recently owned up to with my students. Early career faculty, though bureaucratic sounding and suspiciously popular with funding-boards, at least has a comforting bagginess to it, allowing me to retain one final illusion about academia: that I will somehow know when I have reached the pinnacle of ‘mid-career’ when I get there.

References

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