Practising Theory On Line

Written for the consortium team by
Dr Siobhán Holland and Dr Aidan Arrowsmith

 (Staffordshire University)

Contents

Project mission statement

The Assessment and the *Expanded* Text Consortium is a project directed by the English division at the University of Northumbria. It involves collaborating with colleagues who teach English courses at Sheffield Hallam University, Staffordshire University and the University of East Anglia.

We came together three years ago to build on existing relations between our various institutions, relations which often developed from the role of the external examiner and as a result of the Teaching Quality Assessment visits to our various departments in 1994/5.

We recognized from the very beginning that our work on assessment in English was particularly timely, given the changes in the English curriculum identified in the Council for College and University English's report to the QAA (CCUE/QAA: 1997). Our focus on the expanded text was our recognition that the traditional curriculum had expanded to include, amongst other topics and subjects, aspects of cultural studies, literary theory and creative writing.

We wished to take the opportunity to clarify the role of assessment in our teaching and integrate it much more with student learning. This was often not so much a return to first principles, but rather a learning process which required us to be more explicit about our implicit expectations in the assessment of student work.

The result was four case studies in productive assessment practices for both traditional and newer areas of the curriculum.

Our case studies are designed for use by the tutor who wants to change and develop assessment practice to improve student learning. Each one aims to clarify what makes a successful match between the learning promoted by a diverse range of approaches to literary study and the assessment practices used.

Our selection was made carefully and, in many respects, was embedded in the findings of the English subject review exercise of 1994/5. For the first time, the subject community was asked to explain why it assessed in the way it did, and to evaluate the quality of that practice in relation to student learning. We determined, therefore, to be as explicit as possible in our assessment procedures and to identify and develop assessment practices which made student learning a central theme.

Since then, the Quality Assurance Agency has taken over the process of subject review and the assessment for learning agenda is even more clearly centre stage. New impetus is also filtering in from other initiatives.

The recent draft *statement on benchmarking standards for English* (CCUE/QAA: 1999), for example, identifies critical reading, engagement and self awareness as the key characteristics of an English degree. While these outcomes may be reached by a variety of routes, the benchmarking document simultaneously states that: 'assessment inheres in and informs the learning process: it is formative and diagnostic as well as summative and evaluative, and the process should provide students with constructive feedback.'

It is clear that this benchmarking document both supports and defends our agenda and that assessment continues to be an important issue for the subject. It is both an interesting and contested area, requiring imminent clarification and resolution if we are to match exciting developments in the curriculum with evolving assessment practices which further student learning.

All the case studies in the *Towards a Productive Assessment Practice* series are designed to guarantee that:

- assessment enhances the process of student learning

- the purpose of assessment is clearly understood by students

- effective feedback is an essential part of the assessment and learning process

- assessment methods arise out of the specific learning objectives of the discipline

- thinking about assessment contributes to good teaching practice

- a well-balanced programme of assessment comprises a combination of the traditional and the innovative, the formative and the summative

- assessment processes are equitable and transparent, and encourage active involvement on the part of learners.

Increasingly, colleagues teaching English become involved in paper trails (more accurately paper chases), teaching larger and larger groups of students and simultaneously finding themselves, and their work, more and more accountable to an increasing range of academic and administrative managers.

The material produced by the project is directed at these colleagues. From the beginning it was agreed that each guide would contain: an introduction showing the relevance of the individual case study to the overall project mission statement; a narrative of the assessment method in practice; details of impact on staff and students and appendices containing examples of any materials handed out by tutors to students or examples of student work. Within these guidelines, the authors were given the freedom to develop their case studies in their own way. All the material included has been tried and tested by various staff, working in a variety of conditions, to various student constituencies.

If you would like to cut and paste our examples, to adapt them for your own individual contexts, you might wish to access the project's Web page at http://www.unn.ac.uk/assessingenglish. All four case studies can be downloaded as PDF files, and some of the materials for students are viewable as Web documents. The site also includes a sample demo of computer assisted learning for assessment. Furthermore, there is a searchable collection of other productive assessment practices which have been collected from across the higher education English subject community.

Introduction

This case study details our experience of developing formative assessment activities for a virtual learning environment. Samples of the actual on line materials we produced can be viewed at http://www.unn.ac.uk/assessingenglish. The particular virtual learning environment we use, COSE (Creation of On Line Study Environment) was selected for two reasons. Firstly, Staffordshire University has an ongoing commitment to developing computer based resources. The development of the COSE software has been one of these developments (funded by JISC, the Joint Information Services Council). Secondly, the COSE software is specifically designed to promote active student learning. This focus matches that of the Assessment and *Expanded* Text project.

In what follows, we describe how we used the COSE framework to create a space where students could rehearse the learning outcomes of a first year literary theory module, 'Approaches to Literature', which introduces students to Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism and post-colonial theory in preparation for assessment.

We use COSE to provide our students with a structured 'practice space'. The materials we deliver to students through the COSE software actively involve them in rehearsing the processes of reading, interpreting and writing textual analyses informed by theory. The resources we select and create for COSE provide a means for students both to practise using the ideas they encounter on their first-year courses, and to develop the strategies they can use to communicate those ideas before they are asked to submit similar assessed work. We have not used COSE to deliver assessed work or to replace existing staff/student contact time. Nor have we jettisoned the provision of advice relating to assessed work in handbooks, seminars, lectures and consultation hours. Instead we set out to:

- bridge the gap between seminar learning environments and students' attempts to prepare assessment work independently

- give students a greater sense that they had ownership of the critical tools we were encouraging them to use

- provide students with the skills they needed for assessment projects at the point of need (i.e. when they were learning new ideas and thinking about assignments to come) rather than in separate study skills modules or only in one-to-one tutorials

- ensure that we were producing, more consistently, teaching materials that supported active learning.

This work has resulted in the production of:

- a practice space for students seeking to make use of literary theory

- strategies for embedding 'constructivist' learning opportunities in the teaching of literary theory

- a guide for students which explains the role of COSE materials in their learning

- a guide and a demonstration package for tutors interested in using COSE materials or constructivist approaches to support or develop a positive assessment culture.

These materials have been developed and tested at Staffordshire University and the COSE software is now available to all higher education institutions. You can view a demo version of the COSE system at the project Website. COSE can be adapted to suit the specific requirements of particular institutions and courses.

The nature and scope of the project

The problems we address using COSE

Teaching contemporary literary and cultural theory to level one undergraduates is increasingly felt to be of foundational importance in an English degree programme. Often, as a result of good teaching and careful learning, students do manage to grasp the theoretical logic of, for example, feminism, psychoanalysis or post-structuralism and are interested in these approaches. At Staffordshire, for example, third year students co-ordinate, choose topics for, and present, short papers to a critical and cultural theory reading group. This is chaired by staff members and often attended by students from levels one and two. However, students' ability to apply theories to texts, to practise these 'approaches to literature', often remains a problem throughout their degree programmes. The students' attempts to use critical theory for themselves are often confined to the highly pressurized space and time of the taught seminar and to the assignments, essays and presentations which increasingly count towards end of year results:

'It is definitely good to do things unassessed, and make mistakes. If you make mistakes in the real essays it's very hard.'

When asked if the COSE tasks should be formally assessed, one student explained:

'No, definitely not. Because it's in your early stages of level one, when you're just getting to grips with the terminology. And to throw a first year into an assessed exercise, purely on Marxism, I personally think it's just too much. And it goes to show, because we can't remember the mark we got, but I don't think anybody did overly well, so I don't think it'd be fair.'

In our attempt to provide more support for students working with literary theory and preparing to write essays using theoretical approaches for the first time, we were, in part, motivated by course specific issues. Before the project began, a familiar refrain among our first year students was: 'How can I write like a Marxist or a feminist critic?' Sentence construction in essays suggested that the students often felt they did not have ownership of the critical apparatus they were using. Theory was being kept at arm's length and the roundabout construction, 'A feminist critic would argue that...', was common in written work. Students who had completed the 'Approaches to Literature' course felt uneasy in making use of critical strategies in their own written work. Consequently, we decided to restructure our teaching materials so that we could offer our students more structured and more helpful opportunities to practise using theoretical approaches for themselves.

However, we also wanted to set up this 'practice space' for students in response to more general pressures which we felt were impacting on student performance in first year assignments. Pressures of student numbers and staff/student ratios, have led to an increasingly forced reliance on the end-of-semester essay as a means of assessment for literary studies students in many institutional contexts. This can mean feedback is summative rather than formative. Meanwhile, modularity can often blunt the impact of detailed feedback. Students tend to 'draw a line' under courses at the point of completion rather than seeing the accumulation of cross-module feedback as formative. Larger group sizes can also put pressure on every student's opportunity to make use of, and get feedback, on their first attempts to articulate critical viewpoints. We wanted to create opportunities for students to practise writing about abstract ideas during a module and at their own pace. Assessment requires that students practise, and move towards ownership of, subject

specific and transferable skills associated with the subject, and so increased opportunities for students to produce assessment-style work should help them to gain ownership of literary theory.

We do not believe that computers can solve the problems associated with teaching in a mass higher education environment. Certainly, we do not believe that virtual learning environments can ever replace conventional contact teaching in English studies. The doubts we brought to our work with computer aided learning revolved primarily around two factors. Firstly, the suspicion that virtual learning environments are most useful for 'science' subjects and would be unsuitable for teaching the conceptual thinking required in 'arts' subjects, such as English. Secondly, the suspicion that such environments may be seen as a replacement for staff/student time, by staff, students, institutions or other bodies. However, we have come to believe that computer aided learning can provide a crucial additional environment in which students can practise key, assessment-directed and transferable skills such as close reading, critical analysis, varieties of writing and IT use.

The COSE approach: What is COSE?

COSE is a virtual learning environment which is structured by constructivist pedagogical principles. These principles guide tutors towards the production of teaching materials which function as learning opportunities. The student is encouraged to become an active learner, and learning is always linked, for the student, to the production of the kind of work (written, oral etc.) which is normally associated with assessment. This work is not necessarily assessed in traditional ways, but functions both as a base for conceptual thinking and as a means for the student to practise the practical skills involved in using and communicating complex ideas:

> Constructivism (Duffy and Jonasson, 1992; Brooks, 1993; Tobin, 1993) is the idea that a student is an active learner who constructs a personal base of knowledge and understanding. In other words, the student does more than just 'discuss' a topic. The student actually *does* something: that is, creates a product for delivery to the teacher, classmates or others. Requiring students to do something not only provides the opportunity to create something that might be useful to others, but also presumably increases the depth of learning by the student who produces the deliverable. (Klemm & Snell 1997: 2)

At the COSE Website, COSE's designers have outlined a constructivist pedagogy for their virtual learning environment which explains the relationship between the computer program they have developed and the constructivist pedagogical principles which have structured it:

- COSE acts as a focus for learning.
- COSE allows the tutor to create a study environment which makes the relationship between assessment and learning activity explicit.
- COSE enables the learner to view resources in the context of learning activity.
- Learning activity does not have to be confined to the computer.

By allowing WWW-based and traditional non-electronic resources and lecture programmes to be referenced in the context of specific learning opportunities, COSE provides the focus for an holistic approach to learning.

http://www.staffs.ac.uk/COSE/cose10/whatis1.html

The value of COSE, from our point of view, is twofold. Firstly, it always positions

the student as an active learner while ensuring that learning is fully supported by carefully prepared guidance materials. The student is encouraged to recognize the link between tasks assigned and the component key skills which will enable them to produce their own coherently argued essay or presentation. Secondly, tutors are required to install teaching materials in a format which assigns a structured series of reading and writing activities to the student. Tutors using COSE are always encouraged to think about their teaching materials in terms of learning opportunities.

Why not use the WWW?

We chose to use COSE to present our teaching materials, rather than preparing course Web pages, for several reasons. Primarily, we were aware that simply putting materials on the Web was not going to help our students write more confidently using theoretical approaches. The general increasing use of Web pages among our students had not brought about qualitative improvements in our students' assignments. Having used a more structured system, we are even more wary of the temptation to put teaching materials on the Web as a means of improving student performance. We wanted to generate active learning opportunities for our students and we feel that, although there are some excellent Web resources available in the humanities, these resources tend to rely on students to generate their own ways of learning actively from those materials.

A colleague interested in the development of on line materials observed that 'It is easy to mistake giving a student information, for helping the student to learn.' Although the Web can provide a fantastic way of giving students access to information resources, these IT resources need to be carefully linked to learning and teaching strategies if they are going to be of real benefit to students. COSE's structure continually reminded us that we needed to frame our teaching materials as learning opportunities for our students. We found that information put in COSE for information's sake might as well not be in the system.

One of the first resources we created for COSE resembled much of the on line material currently available to students on the Web. After discussion with lecturers on the 'Approaches to Literature' course about how the Web might best be utilized for such a theory-based course, we prepared an on line, hyper-linked glossary of critical concepts to support that first-year core module. However, this approach to computer assisted learning did not sit comfortably with COSE because it did not provide students with structured learning opportunities. Whereas the on line glossary was originally conceived as an informal source of information, COSE demands that every function, whether it is a 'project', an 'activity', or a 'task', be linked to an active learning process.

Discovering the limits of our initial approach to on line learning has proved to be very instructive. Within the latest version of the COSE 'Approaches' project, students are directed to the glossary as part of a broader assignment which asks them to provide a Marxist analysis of a short poem by Ezra Pound. Before the students embark on writing, they are encouraged to establish their own definitions of critical terms (a process which encourages ownership of, and fluency in, theoretical discourse). The glossary is established as a resource that the students can use as they complete this task. Indeed, the students are then encouraged to engage with, and critically evaluate, the definitions in the glossary. It is situated alongside other resources such as WWW pages, lectures and 'hints and tips' on 'How to be a Marxist critic' which also help the student to develop provisional definitions of key terms. With the student's critical definition now informing his or her analysis of the Pound poem, the glossary is part of a package which positions the student as an active learner, practising skills associated with assessment and gaining fluency with critical discourse for themselves:

'It helps you see "oh that's what that word actually means". Because it's one thing to come across a word when you're reading it, and in context you understand it, but if you have to use it, you have to have a better understanding of its meaning to put it into context yourself. So that's why the glossary is useful, to give you that sort of understanding.'

We wanted to provide our students with structured rather than 'browsable' resources which would help them to recognize and develop the practical skills associated with critical writing. In our lectures and seminars, we were already trying to format our teaching materials as learning opportunities. In COSE, materials will not work unless they are oriented towards the students in this style. The students, having used the COSE materials we describe below, felt more confident than before, not just in their understanding of theoretical ideas, but in their ability to write independently as critics themselves:

'I think it [COSE] did clarify it. By the time I had done the assignment for the Marxist part, I think I had a much better understanding of what a Marxist reading was than when I started. I wasn't quite sure before, whether I was supposed to be a Marxist, or whether…I was thinking, "is there supposed to be Marxism in this text, or am I supposed to be looking for Marxism?" Where it was going to come from, I was unclear. By the time I'd finished I had a much better idea, that it was about me looking for readings in a Marxist way.'

Using COSE

COSE is a content-free system, but COSE pedagogy governs the format of the materials the students see. The student enters COSE from the university's home page using the username and password required by other computer systems in the university. Once in COSE, the student is presented with a 'vista' which lists project work assigned for courses the student is taking. After clicking on 'Approaches to Literature 2000: Marxism/ideology' students find the work associated with the Marxist section of the 'Approaches to Literature' module.

COSE then presents teaching materials in the form of active learning opportunities. Within the remit of a project, the student is asked to complete an 'assignment-style' activity and is then assigned tasks, resources and advice which will help her or him to develop a considered response to the activity. This format encourages students to work 'back' from the kind of relatively complex 'activity' normally assigned to them (the production of an essay or a presentation for example) through the processes which will help them to prepare a competent response to assignment-style questions.

The 'tasks' which support an activity are represented to the student as being clearly related to the production of a considered response. The student might be asked to re-read a lecture, review their own lecture notes, consult specific library or WWW resources or review some 'hints and tips' on thinking critically.

Of course, tutors assume that students will automatically perform these kinds of tasks when they prepare any assignment. However, in a teaching environment where students do not have a uniform experience of pre-university education and are learning the processes involved in producing university level work, COSE can provide an important prompt towards students' production of well-argued written work:

'I'm all for this idea of COSE, the whole concept of the activities and tasks, how they broke it down, it really did help. But that's my point of view, because I'm interested in Marxism.'

'The activities helped because there was a list of points for us to think about, so you knew if you were on the right track.'

'It helped me to plan the answers more precisely and systematically.'

'The list of ways to analyse the poem enabled me to be more methodical in my criticism.'

COSE in practice

The COSE materials we have developed are available to view at the project Website and the resources make considerably more sense on screen than they do on paper.

The student's assignment vista looks like this:
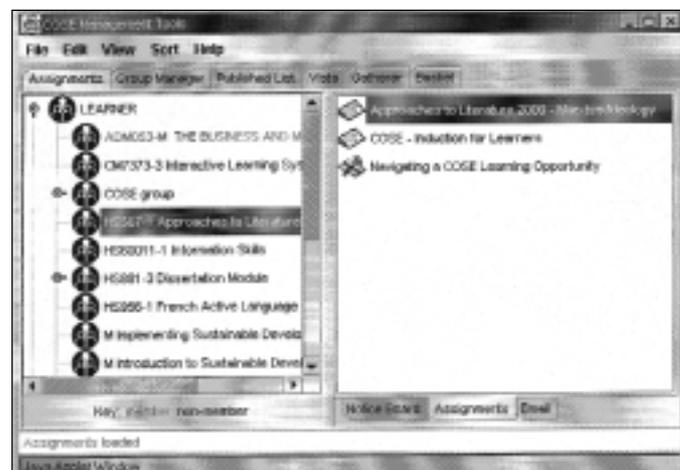
The student clicks on the Marxism and ideology assignment, as indicated, and then clicks on 'file' and 'open in browser.' After reading an introduction to the course the students access the first activity assigned to them and read the following pageset:
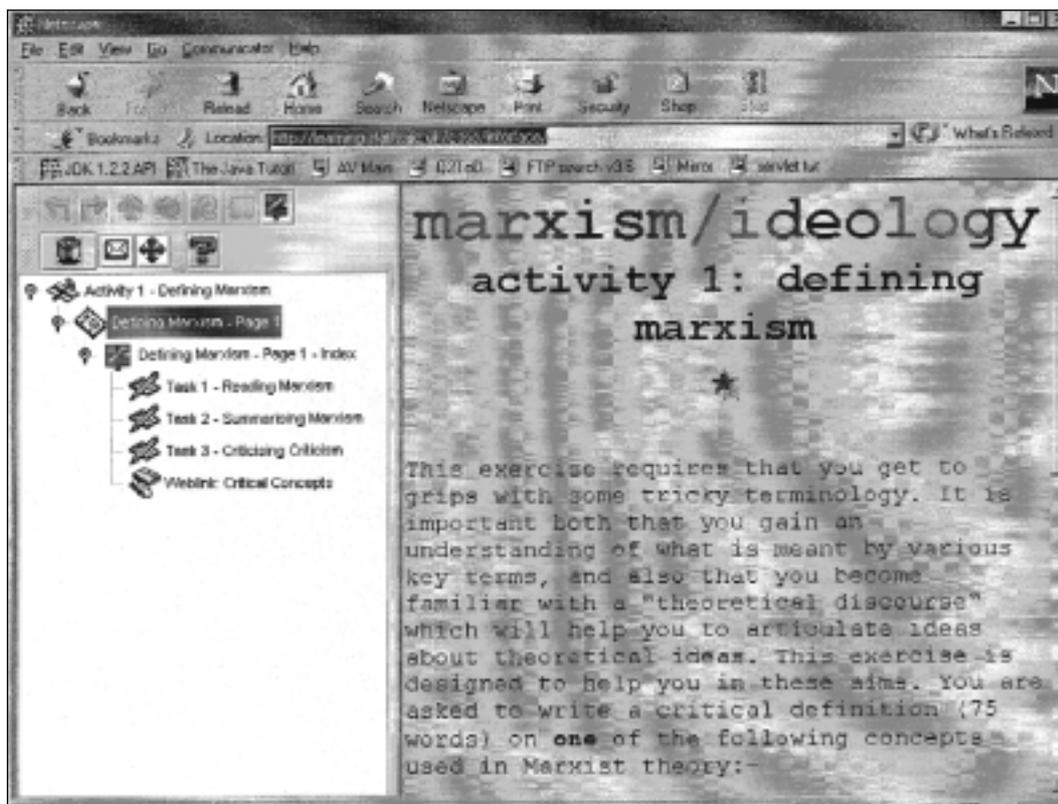
Each page in COSE has its own index, which appears in the left-hand screen and which allows the learner to keep track of her or his place in the assignment. To move to another part of the assignment, click on the relevant icon. The index also contains related pages, links and resources. For this activity, the index contains three 'tasks' which encourage the student to produce a definition that draws on, but is independent of, information already provided in lectures and seminars. The tasks emphasize that the students have been provided with resources for gaining fluency with critical terms. They encourage the students both to conduct additional research and to begin to use critical terms in their own written work:

'I guess it's just making you think about it. Writing about it does make you think more…'

'Because you know, if you're being asked to give an example, you're going to have to be original and you can't write what the lecturer's put, so you have to think for yourself, so I suppose you think about concepts.'

'It helps you to actually think about it, yourself. Sorting your ideas out. To do a definition you have to get the core of it.'

In every assignment, tasks are signalled as components of the activities. The student is encouraged to attempt some or all of the tasks in the process of preparing a response to the 'definitions' activity. At each stage, we explain the relevance of the study skills being promoted in each of the tasks. The first task, very simply, asks the students to review their note-taking skills. It stresses the connection between the good note-taking skills, the review of lecture notes and the development of skills used in the production of assessed work.

The student is able to scroll through the task description before moving on to read the lectures. After reading the lectures linked to 'task one', the student is

encouraged to complete a second task. This time, the student has to do some writing and is encouraged to practise using critical terms in his or her own writing process. Task three encourages the student to practise engaging critically with definitions provided from authoritative sources. Again, it stresses the importance of writing and independent work in the students' attempts to understand complex ideas. The process of writing that is most often thought of as an assessment-related process for students, is being highlighted here as a process which helps the students to develop an understanding of abstract ideas.

The pathway we developed for the second, more obviously assignment-style activity – 'Provide a Marxist reading of Pound's "In a Station of the Metro"' – follows the 'definitions' activity suggested above and invites students to revisit some of the tasks they have already completed. The students are reminded that they need to establish a working definition of 'class' before analysing a poem from a Marxist perspective. In addition, the pathway includes one, more complex task – task four – which prompts the students to work through a process of questioning and evaluation of evidence. This COSE task effectively rules out the possibility of the students producing uniform answers.

The pathway of tasks suggested here invites the students to follow a linear process, tackling tasks and activities that increase in difficulty, but the student is able to pursue and review these tasks in any order they choose. Any attempt to outline methods for study can be criticized as being prescriptive. However, we feel that the benefits associated with suggesting strategies that students can use to develop understanding and assessment skills outweigh anxieties about prescriptiveness.

The examples of student work included in the Appendix demonstrate that students make careful use of the advice embedded in the tasks and activities. Tutors viewing our COSE materials for the first time often move straight to the Web pages, exclaim at the existence of such interesting resources on Marx and then start to generate research paths through these secondary materials. Students, as a rule, head straight for the Web pages, move through the pages randomly and then return to the tasks to make use of the advice on how to generate and make use of research strategies. The advice on assessment skills included in the COSE materials provides welcome support for students working independently for the first time:

'At 'A' level, you go into an exam with the teacher's ideas in your head. Whereas at degree level, you're persuaded into thinking more for yourself.'

'It's [COSE] more of a helper, so that you understand what they're saying.'

One of the functions of the COSE program is that it highlights to students the link between good note-taking in lectures, questions asked in seminars, independent learning and their development of key assessment skills. The teaching environments associated with university are new to most students and we wanted to highlight the ways in which they are connected holistically to the production of considered and fluent written work. Students are often eager to concentrate on work that is 'relevant' to the assessments they are being asked to complete. COSE is able to highlight the relevance of the teaching and learning opportunities offered in lectures and seminars to the students' good performances in assessed work. The examples of student work included below demonstrate the different ways in which students used the tasks and resources independently to develop and organize their ideas.

More complex activities

As we developed subsequent sets of materials in COSE, we found it helpful to reduce the level of on line tutor support and to vary the resources provided for students while working within the same pedagogic framework (e.g. we moved from providing full lectures to note form lectures and added more references to library

materials and Web resources). This approach is evident in the post-colonialism resources available at the demonstration Website.

Instead of providing lists of seminar-style questions, we prompt the students to develop question-forming skills for themselves. For example, the 'how to be a critic' pageset asks each student to formulate a list of questions and to list these at the top of an essay which seeks to answer them. The students are then asked to think about how productive their questions prove to be.

The students are also directed to secondary texts to help them formulate their questions and answers. This assignment stresses more clearly that the processes being promoted to break down and work through the project , note-taking and asking questions, for example, are transferable. It was noticeable in the external evaluator's interviews with students that, at least in some cases, the strategies for learning which are being promoted in the COSE exercises are having a qualitative effect on the strategies students are using to prepare assessed work:

Student A: *'Some advice was given to me, which I find very useful, and that was to write down questions during the time that they give the lecture. If they ask a question, I write it down, because that can guide the way you could go. If a lecturer is telling you about something, and they ask "Why did that happen at that time?" or something...'*

Student B: *'...they do that a lot, don't they?'*

Student A: *'They do, yes. Well, I always make sure I put those things down. Before I'd have thought they were rhetorical questions, but now I think having the questions is very useful, because the questions can always send you off, you know. Whatever you're looking up...[I use that] Whenever I'm doing an essay. You can look at a question and think, oh yes, if I try to answer that question, or adapt the question, or something, then you get ways to research...'*

Student B: *'...It sounds like a good idea, I'll try that out.'*

Where do students write?

The examples of student work included as Appendix (i) demonstrate the variety of ways in which students choose to aproach and execute the tasks. We find that students spend time working on COSE and then review the materials, either in note form or in printout form, when they set about completing the tasks. Although students cannot write directly into the COSE pagesets, they can open up 'Windows' and make notes in a file while working through the COSE exercises. Since we completed our pilot tests on COSE, a facility has been added to the system which allows students to email each other and their tutors from within COSE exercises. We have arranged a system whereby students can submit their responses to the assignment by mail or on paper. Staff comments are then returned to the students in the format they have chosen to use. COSE is a fully-functioning system now, but we are still in discussions with the designers about the ways in which the facilities for handing in and annotating student responses can be improved. At the moment, the exercises we have piloted on COSE have not been compulsory. We are now in a position to consider offering an assignment that can be recognized as an assessed piece of work but we are clear that the real value of COSE lies in its practicality as a practice space for students preparing to write university-level assignments.

We have not yet been able to investigate fully the longer term effects of COSE exercises on students' performance in written assignments, but tutors who have marked work completed by students who worked through COSE exercises last year have suggested that these students have shown 'a noticeable general improvement in written competency' in their second-year assignments compared to students who had not used the COSE materials.

The student guide to COSE

When we tested the COSE materials in 1999 and 2000, we did not present COSE materials to students in their first semester, because we did not want to alienate them or overload them with 'new' experiences at an already challenging time. (Our first year student representatives have since asked that we introduce COSE resources for the whole of the year-long course, but we will probably retain a significant gap between students arriving and their introduction to computer resources.) In the second semester, we arranged hour-long COSE training sessions to coincide with the first week of lectures in the new term, but rather than beginning with computer training sessions, we gave the students a copy of a student guide to COSE during the inter-semester break. The guide explains that COSE works as an additional resource that students can use both to familiarize themselves with theoretical concepts outside seminar time and to gain practice in making use of theoretical approaches.

The guide did not solve every issue the students had with the computer system, not least because COSE had been in development at Staffordshire throughout the project and various technical problems were being ironed out as we worked – often in response to our students' experiences of COSE. For many students, their COSE training session was also their first ever computer lesson, so a certain level of anxiety was present when they first used the system:

'It was quite hard to navigate first of all. The initial hour.'

'Definitely the first stages were very tedious.'

'There was a bit down the left-hand side, that was just impossible…'

However, once the initial period of experimenting with COSE had finished, most students were happy to make use of the resources on line. (Students who suffer from migraines have been the only ones to work solely with the resources on paper as the screen flickering can trigger migraine attacks.) The student guide, used for the first time in January 2000, has gone a considerable way to alleviate student anxiety about using a computer program.

What You Can Do to Develop Your Critical Thinking

What You Can Do to Develop Your Critical Thinking: A Student Guide to COSE Resources

How can I become a critic?

'How can I write as a Marxist critic?'

'I can see why a feminist approach is worthwhile, but I'm not sure how it can help me to get more out of my reading of the text.'

By now you will have completed the first semester of your first year and you will have a better idea of what studying English at Staffordshire is all about. You will also have received marks and comments on the first pieces of written work you were asked to produce at university. So now is a good time to try to think through ways in which you can build on, and improve, your skills in researching and making use of critical ideas. Remember that no one is expecting miracles from you at this stage (apart, possibly, from yourself). One of your main tasks in the first year is 'learning how to learn' in undergraduate ways: you've got to master research skills, critical thinking and essay-writing all at once and we know that this is hard work.

At the end of the first year, you will be set an essay question which will ask you to apply one of the theoretical approaches we've covered to one of the literary texts we've read:

- How are you going to set about answering such a question?

- Are you confident about planning and writing a response to the problem?

- Are you concerned that you have not had much practice in studying, researching and writing about concepts and issues and their relation to literature?

A few years ago, students made it clear to us that they weren't confident about doing these things and asked us to provide more resources to help them learn to write critically. If you feel the same, we strongly advise that you make use of the computer resources which we have put together to help you practise reading and writing as a critic.

'When I read through the "Approaches to Literature" theory anthology, I just felt it went in one ear and straight out the other, so to speak. But when I did it on COSE it really got me into it. I don't think, without having done the COSE tasks, I would be as interested as I am, in the whole idea of Marxism.'

Why do I need to practise reading and writing as a critic?

Most people find critical writing to be quite a challenge, especially when they are trying to get their heads round theoretical approaches, like psychoanalysis or feminism, for the first time. We're asking you to develop a different, and hopefully more rewarding, kind of approach to learning, researching and writing than the ones you used before you arrived at university. But we also want to give you as much support as possible while you're learning to become an independent critic.

So why should I use computers to support my study?

The computer based study package we have developed allows you to practise using critical approaches before you submit your end-of-year essay. The study package will be delivered to you through a 'virtual learning environment' called COSE which has been designed and developed here at Staffordshire. When we have used the package with previous groups of students, they have been very positive about it. They have found that it has helped them to get to grips with critical approaches for dealing with literary texts. It has also helped them to acquire strategies for learning that they could use in other contexts (writing presentations or essays for other modules, for example):

'I'm all for this idea of COSE, the whole concept of the activities and tasks, how they broke it down, it really did help.'

We are always trying to make these materials more useful so we look forward to getting your feedback too.

How do I use COSE?

You will have an introductory training session during which we will talk you through the practical side of using the COSE resources. After that, you can use COSE in any of the student computer labs (listed on the Level One noticeboard). You don't have to log on to the same computer each time. The network will recognize your password and bring your work to you wherever you are working in the university. If you have a home computer and download the appropriate plug-ins, you should be able to use it at home.

Using COSE is not as complicated as it sounds. Once you have gained access to the system using your password, you will be able to find out what work is assigned to you and there are clear guidelines which will help you to move through the tasks and resources available. The technical leaflet we'll provide will help you to find your way around after the introductory training session.

Don't panic! Last year, even the students who had been petrified of computers quickly found that they were concentrating on the content of the study package rather than its mechanics. You can always ask staff at the computer helpdesk for advice. When you are in COSE, you can email your tutors to discuss the content, if you wish, just by clicking on the picture of the envelope, typing your message and the address, and pressing 'send'. There will also be a 'drop-in' session in the computer lab in week two, so that you can speak to us about any difficulties you are having.

How will COSE help me to learn?

COSE can be used in several ways. How you choose to use it probably depends on how you answered the questions at the beginning of the guide. If you feel you need practice in planning and writing a critical response, we suggest that you work all the way through the COSE tasks before completing the activities.

COSE helps you to structure your activities while you are studying, researching and writing about concepts and issues and their relation to literature. So, an activity which asks you to prepare a Marxist reading of a poem, for example, doesn't just leave you to get on with the assignment. Instead, COSE guides you through a series of tasks which will help you to produce a well-thought-out and well-structured response to the challenge you have been set. These tasks might include reading on line lectures, defining key terms, or summarising ideas in your own words.

Students who have used COSE in previous years, have found it really useful to have practical advice about organising and sorting through their ideas, alongside resources such as library links and Web resources and the on line 'critical terms' glossary we have prepared. At university you are being asked to use new kinds of resources and ideas when you develop your ideas for assignments, and using COSE helps you to develop and practise strategies for assessed essays before you are asked to produce an assessed piece of work using literary theory:

'The activities helped because there was a list of points for us to think about, so you knew if you were on the right track.'

'It helps you to actually think about it, yourself. Sorting your ideas out. To do a definition you have to get the core of it.'

'The list of ways to analyse the poem enabled me to be more methodical in my criticism.'

'It helped me to plan the answers more precisely and systematically.'

Another way of using COSE is as a back-up for checking the accuracy of your lecture notes, or as a means of following up on debates in seminars. For example, you may have been discussing ideology and Ezra Pound's poem 'In a Station of the Metro'. Someone in the group may have said 'this poem is a critique on urban society and bourgeois ideology' and you may have thought 'no it's not!' but had not been able to say why at the time. Maybe you were unsure of the way the student was using Marxist critical terms. COSE suggests how you might go about defining key terms for yourself, making critical language work for you.

How will I know whether I am developing my critical thinking?

COSE is designed to supplement, not replace, existing teaching and support. If you do not understand an idea, you can email the tutor about it from within COSE, or you can discuss it with your tutor and other students in seminars or during office hours. This is one of the best things about COSE: it allows us to provide you with practical support when you need it, while helping you to develop independent learning skills.

Do I have to work on the computer system?

Well, yes, because you will not be able to complete seminar preparation tasks without accessing the system. However, don't worry, COSE is easy to follow. It will set you an activity – to write a Marxist critique of a poem, for example – but rather than leaving you to get on with it, it will suggest a number of tasks which will help you to develop your own answer. Some of the tasks involve taking notes from lectures; referencing library resources on line etc.. At each stage of an activity, you can click on buttons for help and you can also access study skills tips, directly related to the assignment you are working on, at any point. Throughout the exercises, COSE tips suggest ways you can make use of those resources when you are planning an assignment. The skills you develop should help you to prepare for seminars and assessed work on other modules, as well as on 'Approaches to Literature'.

Will COSE give me the answers?

No. Sorry about that! But the idea is not to give you 'the right answer' even if we knew what a pure, unsullied, completely objective answer might look like! Instead, we take a more realistic approach and use COSE to help you to develop your own strategies for analysing and discussing literary texts.

COSE might give you a list of questions you can use to help expose a text's patriarchal agenda, but the use you put those questions to, and the answers you produce using them, will tend to be varied. You will want to add your own questions, or leave out or adapt the ones we have suggested.

Literary critics might use the same critical approaches to explore texts, but they do not always agree with each other. Your friend might think that a poem is promoting stereotypes of women, you might think that the same poem is satirising those stereotypes, and you are both entitled to set up and defend your arguments in your written work. Your assumptions about the poem might be different because you have different feminist approaches.

We are not trying to tell you to think in a fixed way. In fact, the opposite. We are just trying to make sure that you've got the tools which will help you to think critically and logically for yourself, so that you can become an active, confident critic, ready and able to defend your point of view in seminars and in essays.

Is the work I do on COSE going to be assessed?

We know that when you are in your first year, you have a lot on your plate. You can feel under a lot of pressure to get good marks for essays which really represent your first attempts to understand new ideas and write in different formats. From our point of view, essays are not just about marks. The main reason we ask you to write them, is so that you can explore and put into practice the concepts to which you are being introduced. The process of writing any essay is always a learning process. If you read over the comments on the essays you have received back already, you will see that your tutors are working to offer you advice and support to help you develop. The COSE materials offer you an opportunity to rehearse and get feedback on the essay writing process, without getting your mark 'written in stone' on your university record. We will give you marks for feedback on the work you do on COSE. The process of working through the materials, combined with the feedback you'll receive, will help you to write your assessed essay at the end of the semester.

How do I submit my work?

Details for the submission of COSE work are included in the COSE materials. You can email your typed answers to us we'll show you how to do this. (Work will not be acknowledged as received until you have received an email response from your tutor.) Comments and marks will be communicated in the format you have chosen to use. Seminar slots and office hours will be set aside for the discussion of the results students produce. You may work in pairs on this project if you wish.

How long do I need to spend on the computer?

Students last year spent, on average, four hours working through the computer pages. After that, they worked on their notes and made use of other materials while they were writing up their COSE assignments. They usually spent even longer on

this second phase of the learning process. This made sense, because after using the support we provided, they were working on developing independent study skills for themselves. You will need to consult the COSE system when you are working on Marxism and post-colonial theory because you'll need the information for seminars, but the tips it provides should also have a longer term use. We hope they will help you to think through all of the critical approaches that you are considering this year. If you want to refresh your knowledge of a critical approach or useful study skills, you can even return to the materials in the second and third years of your degree.

Why COSE? – I'm using Lotus in my other courses

You might find that you are being asked to use Lotus Learning Space or course Web pages on other parts of your degree. While the other computer based resources are really useful, and we spend a lot of time sharing ideas with other departments using computer resources, we feel that COSE provides the most useful tool for helping you to develop the study skills you will need for your degree work in English.

Impact on students

Although we have marked the students' responses to the Marxism exercises on COSE these marks do not count towards the students' end-of-year results. The high completion rate of the Marxism assignments is explained by students' desire to acquire and practise the skills they will need in order to perform well in their assessed work.

We have also considered using peer assessment for COSE exercises and next year, work produced using COSE will play a greater role in the ways in which seminars are organized. This increased role for COSE reflects our students' enthusiasm for the support it provides as they make their first attempts to write using literary theory:

'…that's one thing I find, that we learn things, but we don't really know how to put them in our essays. Like, literally, how do you get words like ideology, things like that, I struggle with quite a lot. It is really good to have to actually do it. If I look back and said which thing is the best on this module, I'd definitely say Marxism. It's not necessarily all to do with COSE, because perhaps I just understood it better, but I definitely would say that that COSE activity helped.'

'It's to do with confidence. I think it would be really useful if feminism and psychoanalysis were on COSE, because as you go through the course, you'd get used to using it, and you'd know it was always there to go back to.'

As a system organized to promote active student learning, designed to work alongside traditional formats for learning and teaching, COSE can provide the student with tutorial support in addition to the support provided within existing formats. It can also foster students' increasingly independent approaches to learning.

Computer resources can be accessed by students again and again, as and when the student needs them. Providing all students with a basic training in a computer package helps tutors to make sure that they are all aware of the computer resources available to them. Most students will be expected to locate information not only in university library catalogues but also on CD-ROMS and on the World Wide Web.

More importantly, COSE resources are reusable, and provide students with advice about writing independently at the students' point of need. Students can choose the level of support they make use of for each activity or task assigned to them, and can review the advice offered as and when they require it. In the second year of testing COSE (99-00), first year students asked us to develop more COSE exercises to support them as they learn to make use of critical approaches in addition to the resources on Marxism. In staff-student meetings which reviewed the format of the 'Approaches to Literature' module, students made it clear that they wanted to use COSE, not to replicate their experience in seminars, but to establish a space where they could practise using theory for themselves in a supported environment.

Issues for tutors

The kinds of general issues which departments will need to consider when using a virtual learning environment to rethink assessment strategies, or to reinforce a positive assessment culture, are discussed below. In addition, we have outlined some of the ways in which working with COSE has affected the ways in which we, as tutors, foster a positive assessment culture through our teaching practice at Staffordshire.

Issues in computer based learning

We were interested in COSE because the pedagogy seemed well-suited to our needs, but we also had to take into consideration the general issues involved in making use of computer based resources. If you, or your department, have considered using computer based resources you will probably have encountered a number of questions about the role of computers in university teaching generally, and in the teaching of abstract subjects such as English in particular. These questions may well have included the worries we ourselves had about:

- loss of staff-student contact time

- computer resources replacing staff

- the resourcing of technical materials and support

- the resourcing of staff time needed to prepare new materials

- the exclusion of students who were not computer literate.

At the other end of the scale, you are likely to encounter, or even secretly harbour, some over optimistic ideas about computer based learning (e.g. suggestions that computers might in some magical way solve the dilemmas involved in conventional teaching, perhaps, particularly those related to assessment). Computers will not do your marking for you if you want to examine the essays, presentations and other discursive forms of undergraduate work that are associated with assessment in English. Nevertheless, a good virtual learning environment might help you to structure opportunities for students to practise their assessment skills

If you want to work through the more general issues associated with using computers to promote active learning, you may find the following resources helpful:

Implementing Learning Technology
http://www.icbl.hw.ac.uk/ltdi/ltdi-pub.htm#ImpLT

Implementing Computer Based Assessment
http://www.start.demon.co.uk/cba/impcba.htm

We wanted to experiment with a system that offered help to students as they worked to develop the abstract skills, and diversity of response, associated with successful undergraduate assessed work in English. The discussion we provide here deals with the ways in which a virtual learning environment, designed on constructivist principles, can operate as a practice space where students can develop positive assessment skills. A discussion of the issues raised below might usefully form part of the evaluation of any resources used for similar purposes in your own department.

Issues for subject based pedagogies

Introducing new resources into teaching is always fairly traumatic. Whether we had used the COSE program, or any of the other virtual learning environments (VLEs) on the market, we would have had to debate compromises and disagreements between our subject based aims and objectives and those supported by the VLEs themselves. Our encounter with the COSE package inevitably involved negotiating between a generic program and our subject specific objectives.

The kinds of concerns we have had about working with computer based learning in English Studies, which we discuss below, were specifically linked to our interest in promoting good assessment practice among our students.

Encouraging uniformity of student response?

At first, we thought that automated resources for teaching English would produce automated responses from our students. We worried that if they all answered their essays making use of a list of 'Marxist questions' they would all produce the same answers, and that they would fail to make use of other questions generated from reading and reflection.

In practice, we found that the resources delivered through COSE did not promote a uniform response. Instead they encouraged students to make structured and active responses to learning opportunities. We were able to use the virtual learning environment to emphasize that students needed to structure their study time in order to produce a good standard of response to assignment questions. Students who are studying at undergraduate level for the first time are often relatively unskilled at the processes of researching, evaluating, drafting and redrafting that are involved in the production of a substantial essay or presentation.

In the independent study exercises we designed for COSE, we were able to outline a flexible process for research and preparation which could then be transferred to other projects assigned to the students. The COSE materials talked the students through tasks such as taking notes from lectures, reviewing those notes, defining terms, asking and generating questions and writing critically.

A COSE exercise provides a range of resources alongside specific exercises which can help to encourage diversity rather than uniformity of response. COSE can guide students through the range of new resources they are getting used to using at university, by providing them with access to lectures, seminar-style questions, Web pages etc., only some of which are authored by the students' tutors. These resources can offer different inflections on the information provided in conventional teaching formats and can be accompanied by advice which helps the students to generate information, questions and arguments for themselves. For example, we provided a glossary of critical terms alongside our own lectures, links to WWW lectures written by other tutors in other universities, sound bites from critics and advice sections on 'how to be a critic' to accompany our 'Marxism' project on COSE.

Creating a 'right answer' culture?

As COSE had been developed with the subject aims of more technical subjects in mind, we worried that it would establish an environment which promoted the production of 'correct answers' without positively encouraging a diverse response.

However, COSE is a content-free system and tutor-produced content can emphasise the importance of diversity of response. We have been able to use COSE to offer a

structured introduction to different 'takes' on the same subject. The presence of different critical voices (provided by different resources imported into, or referenced in, COSE) has helped to promote a culture of discussion in which the student is encouraged to find her or his own critical voice. We found that students used these resources alongside their own collaborative discussions of their assignments-in-progress to produce diverse, but detailed and structured assignments:

'…you learned that if you're going to read a poem from a Marxist point of view, then this is the sort of things you should be looking at. Not this is what you should think. I was just looking at it the wrong kind of way.'

Independent or dependent learning?

We were worried that students would think that structuring tasks and activities was part of the tutor's role rather than part of an approach to learning they could own for themselves.

In our initial experiments with COSE in 1999, we found that less independent students really warmed to the very structured way in which the Marxism materials talked them through the process of developing a response. They tried to use COSE to avoid independent learning. One student noted that 'It was very useful having the lecture material visually available because I could work at my own pace and make sure I understood everything. I would like all lectures available in this way.' We were able to move students away gradually from this reaction in later drafts of the Marxism materials.

In the COSE-based independent study exercises subsequently presented to the same students, we made it clear that we were trying to promote students' ownership of the processes involved in the research and production of assessed work. In these later exercises we gradually transferred responsibility for the development of learning opportunities to the students (asking them to frame questions for themselves, for example, and phrasing the tasks in ways which explained the general usefulness of the strategies we were suggesting the students should use). In these ways, we have been able to use COSE to reinforce the message that learning is an active, and varied, but methodical process. Feedback from our student representatives has consistently suggested that students value COSE as a practice space for active, independent study.

Replicating seminars?

We were wary that we would be replicating what we already did in seminars without generating any 'added value'. Students were already being taught to question and evaluate in seminars and we already used a substantial amount of small-group work to encourage active student learning.

Of course, seminar questions invite students to go through a process of questioning and consolidating their own ideas. However, for first year students for whom the seminar is an unfamiliar environment, predominantly associated with the horror of being asked to provide an answer, the possibility that questions are there to be asked by students rather than just answered (or not answered) is not always clear. COSE exercises can also be used to 'protect' the seminar in the sense that they can help the student to cover some basic materials on a topic, leaving the seminar intact as a forum for active discussion:

'We tend to spend a lot of time in seminars just kind of getting to grips with the ideas and the tutor is very good at getting us to work on understanding the ideas but there isn't always time for us to try using the ideas on other stuff…'

When explaining why students would like more COSE exercises available, a student representative said:

'It's not that we're trying to get out of covering the theories, it's just that we want to have more time to get used to them and have more of a chance to practise using them for ourselves like we had for Marxism.'

COSE exercises, like seminars, provide a forum in which students can practise critical analysis. However, seminars and COSE exercises carry a different emphasis. COSE encourages the students to practise writing in ways that make use of critical approaches. Seminars are on different methods of critical thinking – engagement and articulation, debating and other skills associated with verbal articulation. COSE, used alongside seminars and lectures, can 'add value' to existing teaching methods.

Another of the advantages of COSE materials is that they have the potential to reinforce the connection between the students' activities and those of critics and tutors. They help to promote students' ownership of critical strategies. There are already some excellent paper based teaching resources which encourage students to take ownership of strategies for reading and writing critically. For example, Mary Eagleton's *Working with Feminist Criticism* (Eagleton: 1996) encourages students to consolidate their learning through a process involving reading, reflection, and questioning. COSE is valuable because it provides this kind of support in an environment in which students are clearly invited to take active ownership of critical skills in their independent study. It also, invaluably, encourages tutors to present learning opportunities to students in ways that make this kind of learning possible.

Impact on tutors

During the course of our research, we have sought comments and feedback from tutors as well as students. Here, we present some representative quotes from lecturers in higher education who had either tried to produce learning materials with COSE, or had simply viewed our materials – both on line and in paper based student and tutor guides.

Staff resources

In our discussions with fellow lecturers at Staffordshire and in other institutions, we found that scepticism about computer aided learning and concern about the impact of computer resources upon jobs in higher education is commonplace. Resistance to computers is often compounded by the fact that tutors increasingly think of assessment as an administrative issue and responsiblity. The comments below are fairly typical of the responses we have encountered when we have introduced our COSE materials to university lecturers in the humanities:

'Universities' interest in this stuff is an interest in increasing staff-student ratios, and that means decreasing staff and increasing students.'

'The bottom line is: is it going to help me with my marking tonight?'

The genuine interest shown by tutors in improving the assessment culture for their students is inevitably inflected by these practical concerns. Time and resources need to be found if staff are to develop computer based resources which will help to foster a positive assessment culture. Of course, our time was HEFCE-funded while we developed the resources outlined in this booklet.

However, we feel that a careful audit of the time and resources already given over to offering advice to students about assessment can demonstrate the value of developing reusable resources such as the COSE materials. One of our considerations has been to assess whether or not the time we ordinarily spent in supporting students as they developed assessment skills was being deployed in efficient and timely ways. On a recent visit to another institution, we found that four members of staff were each involved for an entire day in individual meetings with undergraduates to discuss essay preparation. While these individual meetings had an important role in students' academic careers, staff felt that the common elements they repeated in these meetings – the practical and formulaic elements of advice not related to students' confidence levels and academic development – might have been more usefully embedded in the structure of the relevant modules.

Staff time is often devoted to counselling students about assessment *after* the students have received their essays back (not always helpful in a modular system) or in serial one-to-one meetings which involve a high level of repetition. Some of the time, already spent on offering advice to students, can be reinvested in the development of reusable resources which embed guidance about good assessment practice into the structure of taught modules. One-to-one consultations can then refocus on personalized academic guidance rather than on generic concerns.

The following checklist might usefully form the basis of a workshop designed to evaluate the existing use of staff and financial resources in relation to assessment:

Checklist/staff development exercise

- Make a list of the comments you most frequently use to discuss the treatment of abstract ideas, structure and argument when you annotate student essays.

- Make a list of the comments you make informally to students when they seek help about dealing with ideas during essay preparation (e.g. questions asked both before and after assessment deadlines).

- How much time would you estimate you spend giving informal advice in relation to each module you teach? How many students do you see individually to discuss assessment?

- How might individual meetings with students function if 'formula' matters relating to assessment were covered comprehensively elsewhere?

- When would be the most appropriate time to offer advice on the module in question?

- How much use is made of assessment advice provided in module and award handbooks?

- Are there ways in which you might be able to embed the advice you give into the structure of modules?

- Could a virtual learning environment like COSE help you to relocate, reinforce or adapt the messages about assessment implicit in current practice in your department?

Writing new materials

The strengths of COSE lie primarily in the constructivist pedagogy which structures its environment. However, some tutors have felt a resistance to the various demands of authoring materials which complement this pedagogy and have preferred to use Web resources or paper resources instead. For example, a lecturer in media studies we spoke to accepted the potential of on line environments, but preferred the 'freedom' of using the Web:

'What's good about on line environments is the potential to make learning interesting in new ways – with the use of pictures, sounds, movies and links to other sites. Also, of course, we're asking the students to develop IT skills whilst they're learning. But I can't see why I'd want to constrain myself by using COSE when the Web allows me to do the same things without, what seems to me, an approach best suited to the natural sciences.'

'It's mainly an issue of the frustrations of authoring with COSE.'

We have certainly experienced frustrations in our work with COSE. However, for the most part, we have come to see the demands which COSE brings to bear on our teaching practice as being extremely valuable. Not only has the discipline of working within a constructivist pedagogy demanded that we fundamentally interrogate our teaching practice for the better, but such a pedagogical approach, made explicit in the COSE pedagogy, can also provide much in the way of practical help for the under pressure tutor who wishes to support students' learning and the production of good, assessed work.

It is our belief that the potential of COSE lies in its ability to complement existing teaching and learning environments. Many of the lecturers who have viewed our COSE resources recognize this potential.

'COSE supports and enhances other work done in seminars and lectures (at least

partly by giving students confidence in their critical abilities – 'ownership' of their critical thinking).'

'It clearly encourages students to engage critically and independently with ideas.'

'The methodical processes of COSE [are particularly useful]; helping students to think (and write) logically and methodically is to be greatly welcomed.'

'One of the strengths of the VLE seems predicated upon how it may enable students to think carefully, and then to practice raising and applying the kinds of questions (critical and methodological) needed to help them to argue effectively around concepts and categories. Moreover, the 'right answer' culture could then become part of their own critical awareness – i.e. they could build the confidence needed to question that very culture.'

'A strength lies in this notion of 'ownership' – yes! This is something I have come across in essays – the 'feminist critic would argue' stuff. I find that assessment advice as information is fairly useless.'

COSE can be used to support the development of a positive assessment culture, both for staff and for students. This aspect of COSE has appealed to tutors, whether or not they have begun to work with various teaching strategies or computer based resources to improve the assessment culture in their department. The quotes below are all responses to COSE made by lecturers who are in their first full-time teaching post:

'I was just complaining to this student, a few hours ago, that they should have organized the arguments in their essay in a more systematic way, and that I'd made this clear throughout the seminars on the course, and I suddenly thought, "Did I make it clear, or did I just assume they'd just kind of pick up on the approaches I was encouraging them to use?"'

'I discovered last semester (as a new lecturer) that despite what I thought were my best efforts to guide students through lecture and paper material, many students could not assimilate theory into practice. Now I realize that part of the problem (not all) was that such advice cannot give a structured approach to learning. Although some of this was compensated by one-to-one tutorials, this does take a great deal of time.'

'The most useful aspect [of COSE] was its discussion of a task-based pedagogy, an approach that, to my mind, seems one of the most fruitful avenues to explore with the mass expansion of higher education. It made me think about how I might adapt and improve Web-based materials I have used in the past for one of my courses, which was designed for an old university but which needs adapting to be taught in a new university (because it's my experience that students come less well-trained and motivated to cope with independent learning).'

Impact on our teaching practice

For us, as tutors in the early stages of our teaching careers, the main benefit of working with COSE has been its impact on our attitudes to the relationship between our teaching methods and the performance of students in assessed work. Working with COSE requires the tutor to structure teaching materials in ways that provide the student with problems to solve.

COSE has coaxed us to think less in terms of teaching opportunities, and more in terms of the creation of a supportive environment for learning. COSE always positions the student as an active learner while ensuring that, that 'active' learning is fully supported by carefully prepared guidance materials. Our teaching resources

needed to be re-evaluated and re-organized to comply with COSE's demand that students should not simply be given information for information's sake. This process of re-evaluation and restructuring has, in our view, added real value to the teaching materials we use at Staffordshire.

We believe the primary advantage of COSE remains its ability to make explicit to students the strategies and stages they might make use of as they work through questions, concepts and resources in the process of preparing a piece of assessed work. However, we have also found that working with COSE has challenged us, as tutors, to reconsider our practice. Our work with a constructivist virtual learning environment has encouraged us to provide our students with more structured and more helpful opportunities to practise the skills they use when they produce assessed work.

This has had an impact on the ways we teach 'outside' COSE in other formats. This year, we have made far greater use of structured independent study tasks and small-group work in all modules at all levels of the degree programme. The English department at Staffordshire has always won praise from external examiners for the quality of information provided in module handbooks. Encouraged by the lessons we have learned from working with COSE, we are now trying to ensure that all of the materials presented to students throughout a module promote independent active learning and provide clear advice and support for students as they work to produce independent assessed work.

Conclusion

Through our engagement with COSE, and with the broader issues and approaches related to the 'Assessment and the *Expanded* Text' project, we have been encouraged to think of assessment less as an administrative problem and a staff-time issue, than as an integral part of student learning. We are now providing advice for students about assessment *within* our core modules, rather than providing this advice in formats which can sometimes signal assessment skills as remedial or add-on skills. Through our engagement with COSE's pedagogy we have been encouraged to structure our teaching materials more consistently – both within, and outside, COSE – in terms of constructing learning opportunities for our students. These learning opportunities prepare our students for the active, independent process of assessment writing. They also make staff more aware of the demands and responsibilities associated with preparing assignments for students, and students for assignments.

Further references

Various linksites provide access to a vast array of Web resources in literary theory. Voice of the Shuttle (http://vos.ucsb.edu/) and The Pier (http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/pier/subjects/arts/lit.html) are currently two of the best. From there, links can be followed to a great many other link sites, but also to some good 'contents' pages. Peter Krapp's 'Hydra' site (www.hydra.umn.edu) is one of the most interesting on contemporary theory. 'Module' sites are fewer. Differing, though still limited, approaches to the use of the medium are exemplified by Mary Klages (www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/) and John Lye (www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70). The cti-textual-studies site (www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists-a-e/cti-textual-studies/) is 'a moderated list used to disseminate information of interest to people using computers in the teaching of literature, linguistics, philosophy and logic, religious studies and classics, film studies, theatre arts and drama.'

Brown J.S. and Duguid P. (1996) 'Universities in the Digital Age'. On line. Available HTTP: www.parc.xerox.com/ops/members/brown/papers/university.html [13 March 2000].

Entwistle, N. and Waterson, S. (1988) 'Approaches to Studying and Levels of Processing in University Students', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, (58) 258-265.

Kearsley G. and Shneiderman B. (1998) 'Engagement theory: A framework for technology-based teaching and learning', *Educational Technology*, 38, 5: 20-23.

Klemm W.R. and Snell J.R. (1996) 'Enriching Computer-Mediated Group Learning by Coupling Constructivism with Collaborative Learning', *Journal of Instructional Science and Technology*. On-line. Available HTTP: http://www.usq.edu.au/electpub/e-jist/vol1no2/article1.htm

Salomon, G. and Perkins, D.N. (1998) 'Individual and Social Aspects of Learning', *Review of Research in Education* (23).

Stiles, M.J. 'Effective Learning and the Virtual Learning Environment', *Proceedings: EUNIS 2000 – Towards Virtual Universities*, Instytut Informatyki Politechniki Poznanskiej, Poznan April 2000.

Stiles, M.J. and Roach, M.P. (1998) 'COSE - A Virtual Learning Environment founded on a Holistic Pedagogic Approach', *Software for Engineering Education*, CTI Engineering, (14).

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) 'Mind in Society', Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press.

Acknowledgements

We would like to offer special thanks to the following:
Mark Stiles (Director of the COSE project and manager of the learning development centre at Staffordshire University) and Sam Rowley (chief support officer, COSE Project) for their unfailingly patient help and support throughout the course of this project; and to Dr Kay Sambell (education adviser, University of Northumbria at Newcastle) for the very helpful interviews which she conducted with our students regarding their use of COSE – the source for the student quotes used in this booklet.

About the authors

The authors are both currently lecturers in English at Staffordshire University. Dr Siobhán Holland currently teaches modules on 'Contemporary Irish Writing' at level 3, 'Contemporary British Fiction' at level two and contributes to the teaching of core modules for both first and second year undergraduates.

Dr Aidan Arrowsmith currently teaches modules on 'Modernist Writing' and 'Contemporary Irish Writing' at level 3; 'Irish Literature of the Revival' and 'Post-Colonial Writing' at level two; and the English level one core module 'Approaches to Literature'.

Appendix (i)

EXAMPLES

full comments on back

What is meant by the term "Ideology"?

The term Ideology, in Marxist terms, refers to a "false consciousness". What Marx meant by this was that ideology refers to the set of ideas or beliefs adhered to by one person and by a particular society or culture as a whole. People accept these ideological ideas and beliefs as the norm because they are perceived as normal and as something which promotes freedom or equality. These ideas and beliefs are necessary in order for the working class to be exploited by the Capitalists.

Good

— this element - power rels. of ideology needs to be stressed.

Write a short Marxist critique of the following poem:

"In a Station of the Metro".

The Apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

right word choice?

?PROOF READ CAREFULLY.

The first two lines of the poem set an arena of industrialisation. The "station" is a location where people must travel, ordinary people, on their way to work. In Marxist terms the crowd is a collective: probably members of the working class. However, the word "apparition" suggests something very disturbing. The faces are ghostlike and seem to have both presence and non-presence. It is not just one face: it is a multitude: "these faces". The idea of these people being present and not present/living and not living suggest they are members of a society where they only half-exist and are only semiconscious. Are they like ghosts because,

very good

in Marxist terms, they cannot see beyond the ideologies of their society? The term "crowd"

represents a number of people and could, in this instance, refer to the working class.

In the second line of the poem there is a sharp contrast between "faces" and "petals"

and "crowd" and "bough". The faces on the station platform are described as "petals". This

image contains connotations of innocence, but yet at the same time of frailty. In the poem the

"petals" are attached to a "black bough". Are we to take the "bough" as representing ideology

or Capitalism, or both? Anyway, the word "black" suggests danger and one can see the

metaphor of the working class attached to Capitalism as the petals are attached to their

branch. Are the workers (middle-class) dispensable, breakable, like the petals are?

Furthermore, the image of the petals attached to their branch is a natural one with one

petal dying as another grows. Does this mean that the growth of commercialism is also

natural with the ghost-like faces being replaced by new ones as they fade away? However,

there appears to be a concern with the rapid growth of commercialism – the crowd are fast

moving and ever-expanding and this can be illustrated by the contrast with the petals, which

to the observer are slow growing, but still growing rapidly away from the watchful eye.

This poem takes the form of a rhyming couplet and is crucial in juxtaposing the

content of the two lines of the poem. The rhyming couplet is a traditional poetic form and

signifies the concern of the new (commercialism) overtaking the old and traditional (e.g.

aspects of the country). What the rhyming couplet does is act as an instrument emphasising

the rhyme of the two end words, and hence bringing the poem to an end. The two end words

"crowd" and "bough" are illustrative of two comparative aspects: town and country or city

and nature. By choosing the word "bough" to complete the poem, and not "crowd", is

illustrative of the poem's resounding attempt to block off the commercialism that is

threatening to engulf nature.

I really enjoyed reading this –
your response is careful and considered.
  There are some signs of unfinished
business here though — your essay/sets up a (should?)
case for a certain reading of the text so
you need to try for a more decisive tone in
places. Asking questions is a crucial part
of the research process but including
questions leaves the reader uncertain
as to your own position. Look carefully
at the way critics raise issues
(questions) in terms of _stating_ decisively
their reading of the poem.
      I look forward to reading
             your work again.

'In a Station of the Metro'
Ezra Pound 1912 – 13

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

I think this is an imaginist poem. It has clear, crisp, visual images. It doesn't rhyme and the rhythm is irregular, having six iambic feet in the first line, but an inconstant changing rhythm in the second.

imagist

The voice, in the title, is speaking from an exalted position, a position of status or authority, 'a station' in the city or metropolis. It could be said that the voice, in quotation marks, is announcing its position in the city. Its separation from the body of the poem emphasises its place above and apart from, the hoi polloi. (Like standing on a platform in a station seeing a train go by, what passes is being observed.)

is a station exalted — marxist reading might focus on commuters. ✓

We are told, in line one, of a revelation experienced by the voice, a vision of what is thought to be the state of society. The vision passes before him like a train full of people or the apparition is revealed like a manifesto. Faces can be seen, individual, light and clear with features, these represent the elite, the bourgeoisie standing out against the 'crowd' or dark mass of population, the proletariat. The image of lightness in the few faces gives a feeling of vulnerability and contrasts with the dark mass to create a sense of threat. The faces seem fragile; they could easily be crushed or overwhelmed by the crowd. The crowd is faceless, featureless; it could become a mob. We are being warned of the threat from this homogeneous mass. *Be careful not to give the poem a different tone.*

not a grammatical sentence.

Why religious lang? over'actism ✓

paying attention to the word 'apparition' would have helped here.

Line two repeats the warning. Another metaphor is used to convey the same message. The bourgeoisie or elite, are described as petals, delicate, beautiful people in danger from the dark arm of a militant working class. Again we have lightness in the petals contrasting with the darkness of the image of the workers. 'the wet dark bough' with its three stresses implies strength as well as emphasising the point. The image of a strong 'black bough' conjures up another image of a symbol of a raised bent arm with clenched fist, representing united workers who again, the voice is saying, pose a threat of destruction to the bourgeoisie.

/ ?

good.

The first long line with its regular iambic meter and the second shorter line with its broken rhythm implies speed and urgency. The poet has used this to give a sense of alarm to his message. The message in this poem is to beware the workers and communism, strengthen the bourgeoisie and weaken the workers to safeguard the status quo and maintain security.

| ?

A really interesting reading Sheila. Be careful not to impose imagery of your own on the text though!

Page: 2