

Editorial

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Professor Ben Knights, Director of the English Subject Centre.

Sitting down to write an editorial less than a week before the Commons vote on the Higher Education Bill focuses the sheer unsettlement of working in Higher Education at this moment. Yet it is altogether too easy to expect the worst, and the truth is that we simply do not know how variable fees and quasi-marketisation will impact upon the English spectrum. At the same time, to write for a community of expert readers, well-versed in genre and able to nail a cliché at a thousand metres makes one acutely conscious of the sermonic underpinning of the editorial form: a narrative urge to array the difficulties and then, through a cunning peripeteia, reveal these difficulties to have been soul-building challenges after all.

In trying to provide a frame for the articles which follow, I am aware there is altogether too much news, and that the changes through which HE is passing all point to highly uncertain outcomes, perhaps especially so for subjects perceived as non-vocational. ('English is a hedonistic subject', as one university careers adviser not altogether helpfully remarked.) Last autumn's Bulletin and the boxed items here are intended to remind the subject community of the range of policy earth-movers – not least the arrival of Centres for Excellence, and the formation of the Higher Education Academy – which are in the process of reshaping our landscape. On a parochial level, there is much to celebrate. For all the qualifications and misgivings expressed, the evidence of the recent English Subject Centre *Curriculum and Teaching Survey* (Report Series No. 8) is that the subject is thriving, well positioned to exploit the creative tension between core and diversity in its curriculum, and inventive in its pedagogy. A major role for the Subject Centre network in the nascent Academy seems reasonably assured, and as an earnest of good intent the Funding Councils have extended our funding to the end of 2005 so as to tide

us over during the interim.

Yet alongside the good news, it is above all the agendas imposed from above which breed a sense of powerlessness. This could well become the case in the domain of learning and teaching. Much as they might welcome current attempts to enhance the prestige of teaching, English professionals entertain not unreasonable suspicions about generic learning and teaching discourse. They distrust cut-and-paste formulae, abstract taxonomies, four phases of this and five stages of that. Confronted by earnest 'evidence-based research' they itch to rebut the imputation that the rest of us don't draw on evidence. Nevertheless, we should beware this suspicion turning into a high-minded refusal to engage with pedagogy as a subject. We should be prepared to learn from the best of generic ideas about learning and teaching, and at the same time build on (and be unabashed about sharing) the wealth of discipline-sensitive practices generated by our own community.

Which is where your Subject Centre comes in. Thanks to the excellent support of the Council for College and University English, our Advisory Board, and the subject community more generally, we could be far more than a co-opted agent of orthodoxy. We are I believe in a good position to assist in the identification and advancement of the subject's own pedagogic strengths. One example would be the joint Palgrave/Subject Centre *Teaching the New English* book series, for which the first contracts have started to go out. Another, (though it is only at an early stage) is a scheme for a refereed journal on teaching English in HE. 'English' here is intended to convey the whole literature – language – creative writing spectrum, and the intention is ambitious. The idea grows out of a conviction that the constellation of subjects under the English branding possess an inherent relationship to pedagogy. That 'English' in all its manifestations has historically been a pedagogic, dialogic (and self-critical) practice as well as a body of knowledges. That the preoccupations with complex communication and dialogue, with metaphor, with narrative, resonate simultaneously at the levels of teaching and research. This is not simply a matter of talking to ourselves (though we do and must continue to do that). In a paradoxical sense English should perhaps become more

rather than less self-regarding. The subject has a contribution of its own to make to the cross-disciplinary scholarship of teaching. We only have to look at the way in which, for years, metaphor, narrative and storytelling have been growing in importance in forms of training for professionals in Health and Social Care – just as they always have been in the ambience of psychotherapy. Where ‘reflective practice’ is among the competing orthodoxies, we can pertinently ask what is a novel but a working model of situated learning? We should not be deterred from sharing with a larger community our productive skills of reading and interpretation, for fear of falling back into the somewhat imperial claims of Leavis’s *Education and the University*.

English (thankfully) has its big beasts, and they prowl the conference circuits, often enough striking fear in the hearts of their audiences. But my hunch is that a high proportion of those attracted into the subject are actually quite private, self-effacing people,

ill-suited to interpellation into entrepreneurial subject positions. We would rather, so to say, chain ourselves to Binsey Poplars than infiltrate the counsels where decisions about forestry and land use are made. As one of the number of such people, I want to appeal to the rest of you. Embarrassing and hubristic as it feels to say so, it is time we made a noise. Subject English in its varied forms has serious – even profound – things to say about learning, things which a much larger HE community needs to hear. Six months working for the English Subject Centre has reinforced for me a sense of the creativity of our subject spectrum: a creativity which is lived out at once in the abundance and inventiveness of scholarship and research, and in the vitality of the dialogues which run through our pedagogy. The English Subject Centre will do whatever it can to support the community in doing justice to this timely and eminently practical knowledge.

Don't miss out on... Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

This scheme is going ahead (within England), despite the serious reservations voiced by the Learning and Teaching Support Network among others. By the time this Newsletter is published, HEFCE will have announced the invitation to bid. (See the HEFCE website at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/hefce/2004/04_05/ . You might also wish to look at the LTSN consultation response at <http://www.ltsn.ac.uk> and the information on the Higher Education Academy website www.heacademy.ac.uk/CETLs/default.asp). Given the prestige – not to mention the sums of money – involved it is very important that English-based colleagues should be involved in bidding teams. If there were to be no English Studies interest, the subject community could lose out to a significant degree.

English colleagues should not simply assume that CETLs have nothing to do with them. One way to think about this would be to build on any teaching or learning projects or initiatives with which your department has been involved. Subject Centre mini-projects? Institutional excellence schemes? E-learning, skills, PDP, or access initiatives? Or, again, have you been involved in collaboration with related departments (drama? linguistics?) which impact in interesting ways on your curriculum, assessment, or student experience? Given the emphasis placed on collaboration, the route to a CETL might well lie through work you have done with colleagues in other departments.

The emerging centres will be required to work closely with their Subject Centres both at the planning and dissemination stages. While it appears anecdotally that some Higher Education institutions have already selected their bidders, there may well be room for manoeuvre in others. Institutions can make up to three bids (depending on their size) plus one cross-institutional bid, and while many proposals are likely to be generic, there would be room for subject-based as well as cross-disciplinary bids. All the signs are that HEFCE is prepared to be flexible about the size and even number of the centres, with the thinking moving towards more (i.e. more than the 70 originally suggested) and in some cases smaller centres. This may in itself mean there is more scope for humanities bids. The LTSN (soon to be absorbed in the Higher Education Academy) is in the process of setting up two national briefing workshops on CETLs on the 2nd and 4th March (the latter focuses on arts and humanities subjects) so you would be well advised, if interested, to try to make sure you are included among your institution's participants. Details of these can be found on the Academy's website as given above.