News and Reports

English and Area Studies

Dr Siobhán Holland, English Subject Centre

Last autumn, the English Subject Centre organised two events which related to two of the area studies with which literary study is most closely associated. The events on 'Teaching American Literature' (October 24th 2003) and 'Irish Studies in the Curriculum' (November 7th 2003) were held at Senate House in London and drew delegates from a wide range of institutional contexts. They also drew on collaborations with projects and organisations with detailed knowledge of the area studies involved. The 'American Literature' event was organised in collaboration with AMATAS: the Americanisation project (**http://www.amatas.org**) while the event on Irish Studies was co-organised with the British Association for Irish Studies (**http://www.bais.org.uk**) and the Institute of English Studies.

Both events explored the issues involved for lecturers who have to balance their research and teaching affiliations with the structures offered by their institutions. Many of us are happy to identify ourselves as being 'area studies' people while at the same time finding ourselves operating under different identities in practical terms. Lecturers who contribute to 'American Studies' or 'Irish Studies' programmes, for example, are often lodged in English departments and teach to single-discipline undergraduates as well as to those interested in interdisciplinary approaches. Other colleagues are only in a position to offer 'area studies' style modules on pathways or as lone modules within the confines of traditional disciplinary-based programmes.

While 'American Studies' academics have traditionally been more likely to have the chance to teach in dedicated programmes, they, like their colleagues in Irish Studies, are increasingly likely to find that programmes, departments and even faculties are being adjusted around them in ways that complicate any attempt to promote or maintain area studies programmes or genuinely 'area studies'-inflected ways of reading literature. The plenary speakers, Dick Ellis from Nottingham Trent and Paddy O'Sullivan from the Irish Diaspora Project at Bradford respectively (as well as Roy Foster from Oxford who responded to Paddy's paper), helpfully explored the issues raised by sets of interdisciplinary, disciplinary and institutional affiliations.

As both events were concerned to some extent with 'national' literatures, delegates discussed students' preconceptions about the possibility of using literature to gain a totalised, authentic knowledge of a coherent and self-identical society. At the 'Teaching American Literature' event, Bridget Bennett from the University of Leeds discussed the problems involved in persuading students to engage with versions of the past in American literature modules. Jill Terry from University College, Worcester explored the problematics of developing curricula which give students access to minority or countercultural voices while at the same time not writing canonical American texts out of the student experience. Colleagues involved in the AMATAS project shared some of their workshop materials. Meanwhile Paul Giles from Oxford University called into question the frameworks for reading American literature which have become conventional in the delivery of programmes over the last twenty years.

At the Irish Studies symposium, delegates discussed the investment students often have in Irish studies courses in terms of their own searches for 'authentic' identities. Meanwhile Matthew Campbell from the University of Sheffield and Siobhán Holland from the English Subject Centre debated the issues involved in, and strategies for, teaching Irish texts to English students. Derval Tubridy and Lucia Boldrini from Goldsmiths discussed their approaches to teaching Joyce and Beckett both in contexts where Irish issues or contexts are and are not prominent or determining factors. Their papers helpfully raised the problem of exceptionalism: that is the strategy of teaching American or Irish literature as if it is created in totally

unique circumstances that render comparisons with other literatures irrelevant.

Increasingly, courses on Irish texts are attracting undergraduates and postgraduates who have few or no preconceptions about Ireland. Paddy Lyons from Glasgow discussed his experiences of designing and delivering Irish literature courses in Scotland as well as elsewhere in the European Union. The issues involved in organising programmes were discussed in detail at both events. Conor Carville and Daragh Minogue from St. Mary's College helpfully shared their experiences of re-validating and effectively retrenching the role of an Irish Studies programme. They also outlined their Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning 'Area Studies' project bid, which promises to introduce students to interdisciplinary debates on migration and make use of creative writing

as a critical approach. Their ideas helped to suggest some of the ways in which innovations in English and Area Studies programmes can be productively and innovatively combined. One of the major drivers for this kind of interaction is offered by the extension funding recently allocated to the AMATAS project which will allow for the further development of its work in and with English departments.

What was striking for those of us who attended both events was the extent to which similar debates emerged and shared concerns were raised. The levels of coherence remind us of the importance of there being a Subject Centre with responsibility for area studies (see **www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk/areastudies.aspx**), and the relevance of its sustained and detailed interactions with other subject disciplines, subject centres, projects and associations which have investments in area studies.

A View from... under the Administrator's desk in the English Subject Centre

Carole Eckersley, Administrator at the English Subject Centre, shares her experiences in organising the many events that we run each year.

The badges are ready, the participant list typed, the folders are filled and ready to go... and then... a last minute programme change – oh no. Take out programmes from folders – discard. Type new programme, photocopy, replace in folders – lovely all ready to go... What's that? Two new participants? – take out delegate list from all folders – discard. Add names to delegate list – photocopy – put in folder... all ready to go. Oh yes, don't forget to type badges for new delegates and add to box. Lovely, everything ready to go. And then... speaker rings to ask if a laptop with Powerpoint can be available. Contact venue, be very apologetic and ask for laptop. Cower under desk, grovel a bit – laptop

arranged. Oh yes, remember to ring venue and add two new people to catering numbers. Be very apologetic, cower under desk – extra numbers added to catering. On day of event, several people ring saying they haven't received map for venue – print out map, fax to numbers given. Also on day of event, call from venue, coffee hasn't arrived.

Ring caterers at venue, grovel a bit and point out coffee hasn't been served. Cower under desk – coffee will be delivered. Day after event – thumbs up from everyone concerned – EVENT A SUCCESS – all above disintegrates into a sense of well being.

Can't wait for the next one.

Two Events in Glasgow Addressing C & IT Issues

On December 4 and 5 the English Subject Centre held two distinct but related days at the University of Glasgow looking at issues surrounding the use of C & IT in English. The first day, entitled *New Initiatives in English and Technology*, drew together speakers from different backgrounds working in this area. In the morning we looked at three projects that were initiated by colleagues within higher education: the ARIES project from the University of Glasgow, the computer marked test that was commissioned by the English Subject Centre and an innovative first year module devised at York St John in which the students worked in groups to create contextual material online for the literature studied.

In the afternoon representatives from the BBC, Literature Online and Blackwell's Literature Compass gave their perspectives from outside the higher education sector. The day was designed to highlight the many possible working methods and approaches that digital technology has inspired as well as the opportunities for cross-sector collaboration.

The second day, entitled *Enhancing Online Discussion,* began with a broad overview of the work being done in this area across the country. Nine speakers representing as many institutions and approaches to the use of online discussions, presented a snapshot of their work in rapid succession. This vast array of experience was further enhanced by a workshop given after lunch by Dr Kate Boardman from the University of Durham which forced the participants to think carefully about the objectives of their online discussion work. Two further papers followed: one on the role of the moderator by Panos Vlachopoulos of the University of Aberdeen and the second on the true usefulness of video conferencing by the English Subject Centre's Brett Lucas. These provided the audience with further thoughts about the most productive ways of using the technology at our disposal. The day was rounded out by an animated discussion which eventually had to be moved to the College Club bar to conclude.

Many of those who attended are located in Departments where their own work is unusual and therefore this gathering of like-minded individuals was seen as a great boost in morale for all who participated. These two events together clearly demonstrated that, whilst it is still an emergent area, the introduction of C & IT in the curriculum is accelerating through the development of many new approaches to teaching with technology.

Personal Development Planning for the Fainthearted: what's in it for us?

Rob Ward, Director of the Centre for Recording Achievement, offers a perspective on Personal Development Planning (PDP) for those who have yet to get started.

The English Subject Centre's recent 'Survey of the English Curriculum and Teaching in UK Higher Education' (available from **http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/publi cations/reports.htm**) found that whilst 39% of responding departments were using personal development portfolios and 23% were planning to introduce them, 36% were not using them and had no plans to introduce such practice. This is despite a recommendation in the 1997 Dearing Report that structures to enable PDP are in place by 2005/2006 (see

'So what exactly is a progress file?' on the FAQ page of the Centre for Recording Achievement's website: **http://www.recordingachievement.org/**).

It is true that PDP has evoked hostility from some academic colleagues, who tend, variously, to view it as another:

- load of educational jargon
- job to do
- form-filling paper-pushing activity

- demand from QAA
- distraction from my core work as an academic
- activity the students don't want.

This is, however, not the only view held by academic staff. In 2001 the Learning and Teaching Support Network and the Centre for Recording Achievement collaborated to produce a collection of institutional case studies of developing PDP practice. In some of these initiatives English as a discipline featured strongly,[1] and through them all emerged a rather different set of messages. PDP is recognised as being about improving student learning - a mainstream academic process, with very clear links to learning, teaching and the formation of a 'graduate identity' by our students:[2]

Because the elements of description, analysis, synthesis and evaluation which characterise reflection upon experience are also central to academic learning, the process makes a contribution to academic skills development, and supports academic learning

and

The skills of personal development planning are practised implicitly in many areas of the academic curriculum, especially in projects and dissertations which require the student to develop a piece of work over time, making regular interim reviews of progress, and receiving and responding to feedback in order to improve the outcome.

We need to get the balance right between institutional policy, which may suggest some commonality of approach, and developing what we might call 'psychological engagement' with the processes of PDP by staff and students. Those who see this only as an institutional responsibility might want to think again: all the evidence suggests that, where practice works, departments have had at the very least a hand in devising it.

Staff involvement and support, and particularly the consistency of this support, is likely to be highly influential in encouraging student take up – even where

student responsibility for the PDP process is emphasised:

The Progress File is not a substitute for, but an aid to, effective tutoring.

Students themselves emphasised that, where the process was linked to tutorial provision, the response of the Tutor was a significant 'driver' (or non-response a significant 'inhibitor') in relation to student engagement.

and elsewhere

Where the PDP is regarded by personal tutors as an integral part of the student learning process its relevance is appreciated by students.

Ensuring that staff and students 'buy-in' and that links are established to learning and teaching are key: our practice must address these issues. This includes resources and workload issues. Even with the opportunity of 'piggy-backing' on earlier development work there is probably an initial investment to be made, but evidence from existing practice suggests that staff time and resources need not be an issue as the process becomes established.

If we seek to add PDP on top of existing provision this is likely to be a continuing issue. Unsurprisingly, almost no one is proposing this! We know that PDP processes can be configured to a range of different situations to support learning, progression and student development. If this initiative is best seen as a means of making more explicit and improving the quality and consistency of what we do already, then we need to identify what we want this process to support us in doing, and what we want to avoid.

Links

Centre for Recording Achievement:
http://www.recordingachievement.org/

Readers may also wish to refer to the University of Nottingham's PADSHE ('Personal and Academic Development for Students in Higher Education') project: **http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/padshe/** which had strong connections with English.

---

1 See for example:
   http://www.recordingachievement.org/downloads/100055.pdf;
   http://www.recordingachievement.org/Case_Studies/cs_detail.asp?sid=19

2 All quotations taken from Ward, R: *Developing and implementing institutional policy on PDP: setting the scene.* In Jackson, N and Ward, R: *Personal Development Planning: Institutional Case Studies.* LTSN 2001.

Text Book Review: *Get Set for Literature*

Tracy Brennan, a third-year undergraduate on the BA English Studies at Teesside University, reviews *Get Set for English Literature* by David Amigoni and Julie Sanders, Edinburgh: University Press, 2003

Get Set for English Literature is a concise and informative study guide aimed at providing advice to the first year undergraduate on matters both practical and academic. The authors make no claim for this book as a definitive guide to University life; rather they briefly address a broad range of topics pertinent to students of English literature. The introductory section is a little patronising in tone. Not only does it confirm that the reader is a student of English literature participating in a degree course but it also repeatedly offers itself as a comforter that can "help you navigate the choppy waters of a literature programme."

This tone does not persist however and the rest of the guide addresses specific areas of concern to the first year student. Chapter One succinctly outlines the changing structure and increasingly diverse nature of an English literature degree and introduces topics such as literary theory and the significance of modularity as a feature of curriculum organisation. The authors draw upon a diversity of writers in order to address their own question "Why Study English Literature?" and in so doing effectively communicate the heterogeneous nature and creative potential of this course of study.

In an attempt to effectively demonstrate the different learning experiences that can be expected at university level, Amigoni and Sanders elect to provide a series of case studies or potential lecture/seminar scenarios. Whilst these make interesting reading, one wonders whether the structure of the learning situation could not have been articulated more clearly without recourse to such in-depth examples as they occasionally serve to render the lecture/seminar prescriptive.

One of the most useful elements of this guide is that it often addresses small and seemingly insignificant points that are actually integral to the learning process at university level study. Chapter Three, for example, stresses the importance of feedback and progress interviews to the learning process, highlighting a valuable learning resource that is often overlooked or neglected. The guide also encourages early use of journal articles, a regular cause for concern amongst first year undergraduates and an area in need of demystification.

Get Set for English Literature offers useful and practical advice on everything from taking lecture notes to time management strategies and incorporates a very thorough section on research skills. There are also tips about referencing and a checklist for essay writing. The book ends rather abruptly at The Big Day: Taking the Exam, but then so does Level One; and although the tone is occasionally condescending ("have a notebook (and pen)") the content is interesting and accessible.

IT Works!

This new section of the newsletter by Brett Lucas, Learning Technology Officer and website Developer at the English Subject Centre, profiles IT developments for use in teaching. Here we present two software packages, an interesting project, the launch of a new subject gateway and a new publication on e-learning.

Easy to use Online Quiz Software

Those of you who are already using 'Hot Potatoes' free online quiz software will already know how powerful and easy to use it is. For those who don't, the release of version 6 for Windows is packed with features. There are six separate applications that make up the download enabling you to create a wide range of on-line learning, testing or diagnostic-type exercises: the ubiquitous multiple choice question, short answers, jumbled-sentences, crosswords, matching/ordering and gap-fill exercises. The new version allows time limits on question sets as well as the ability to mix question types in one exercise. Download Hot Potatoes and give it a try! **http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/hotpot/index.htm#downloads**

Create audio-visual presentations with SMIRK

Imagine a simplified PowerPoint–type application with a voice recorder in the interface. Now with a microphone attached to your PC you can create multimedia slideshows complete with voiceover, associated text as well as pictures, diagrams and hyperlinks all in a totally accessible format. Your completed lecture/presentation can then be posted to the web. You can download SMIRK from **http://homepages.feis.herts.ac.uk/smirk/**. The site contains some sample presentations and the development team would welcome your feedback.

e-Prints UK Project

The goal of this project is to share electronic archives of research output (theses etc) across UK HE and FE. A series of workshops is being run to provide an introduction to ePrints and institutional repositories and the issues surrounding them. **http://www.rdn.ac.uk/projects/#eprintsuk**

Artifact launch

The Humbul Humanities Hub has a new sister with the recent launch of ARTIFACT (**http://www.artifact.ac.uk/**) a new free online subject gateway to the arts and creative industries. The cataloguing team at Artifact have identified a range of high quality online resources in areas including: culture, performing arts, communications and media and design. While we are talking hubs… why not give the new 'search refinement' tool on the Humbul website a tryout. (**http://www.humbul.ac.uk/index.html**). Easy to use drop-down menus on the search results page make it much faster to navigate to the resource you're looking for.

e-Learning series

The LTSN Generic centre has produced a series of guides to e-learning aimed at specific audiences within UK HE including heads of department and teachers. Written by leading practitioners in the field these guides contain a wealth of practical advice and are useful for those working on e-learning strategy etc. You can either download the individual titles from the Generic Centre website **http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp?id=1 9519** or contact brett.lucas@rhul.ac.uk if you would like all the titles in a binder.
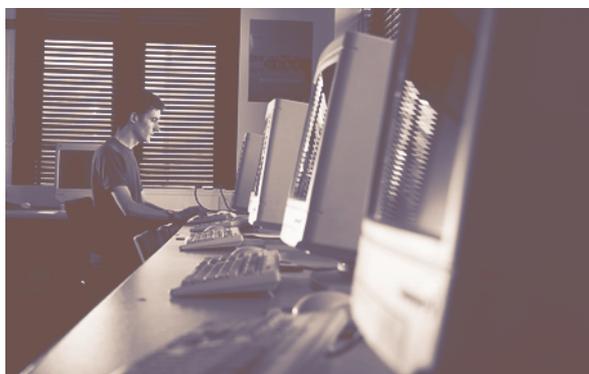
The English Subject Centre Report Series

Our Report Series is now well-established. Copies of all reports are available on our website, and most are circulated in paper form to English Departments in the UK. Further copies are available on request, subject to availability.

Published Reports:

Report no. 1, *Admission Trends in Undergraduate English: statistics and attitudes*, Sadie Williams, April 2002 ISBN 0 90219 443 7
URL: www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/publications/reports/Admission.pdf

Report no. 2, *The English Degree and Graduate Careers*, John Brennan and Ruth Williams, January 2003 ISBN 0 90219 463 1
URL: www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/publications/reports/gradcareers.pdf

Report no. 3, *Postgraduate Training in Research Methods: Current Practice and Future Needs in English*, Sadie Williams, February 2003 ISBN 0 90219 4 68 2
URL: www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/publications/reports/PGtraining.pdf

Report no. 4, *Good Practice Guide: Access and Widening Participation*, Siobhán Holland, February 2003, ISBN 0 90219 473 9
URL: www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/publications/guides/AWPguide.pdf

Report no. 5, *English and IT*, Michael Hanrahan, December 2002
URL: www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/publications/reports/C&ITReport.pdf

Report no. 6, *Good Practice Guide: Creative Writing*, Siobhán Holland, February 2003, ISBN 0 902 19478 X
URL: www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/publications/guides/CWguide.pdf

Report no. 7, *External Examining*, Philip Martin, March 2003 ISBN 0 902 194933
URL: www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/publications/guides/Externalexam.pdf

Report no. 8, *Survey of the English Curriculum and Teaching in UK higher education*, the Halcrow Group, Jane Gawthrope and Philip Martin, October 2003 ISBN 0 902 194291
URL: www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/publications/guides/curr&Teachmain.pdf

Forthcoming:

Report no. 9, *Good Practice Guide: Part-time teaching*, Siobhán Holland.