

In at the Deep End?

The First Year in Undergraduate English Literature

David Ellis

Report Series

Number 17
June 2008



In at the Deep End?

The First Year in Undergraduate English Literature

David Ellis

Report Series

Number 17
June 2008



ISBN 978-1-905846-15-3

Copyright Statement

- a) The author of the report is David Ellis, who should be referenced in any citations of the report and acknowledged in any quotations from it.
- b) Copyright in the report resides with the publisher, the Higher Education Academy English Subject Centre, from whom permission to reproduce all or part of the report should be obtained.
- c) If any additional use is made of secondary data the source must be acknowledged.

The Author

David Ellis is a Principal Lecturer and the Subject Leader for English at the University of Wolverhampton. Much of the research for this report was conducted whilst he was at the University of Derby. He is the author of *Writing Home: Black Writing in Britain Since the War* (Ibidem Press, 2007).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all those who responded in the course of the research for this report, and also Mary McNally (University of Derby) for conducting some of the interviews.

Note

The Examples of Practice presented throughout this report are drawn from the Case Studies of Derby, Wolverhampton and Sheffield Hallam which appear as Appendices 2, 3 and 4 respectively. The italicised quotes used throughout the Report are drawn from survey responses.



Contents

Foreword	2	7. Assessment	15
Introduction	3	7.1 The essay	15
1. English within the universities	5	7.2 Examinations	15
1.1 The autonomy of programme design	5	7.3 Other common assessment tasks	15
1.2 Retention as a model for design	5	7.4 Over-assessment	16
1.3 Personal tutors	7	7.5 Drafting	17
1.4 Attendance policies	7	7.6 Non-assessed tasks	17
2. The deployment of staff across the degree	7	8. Assessment criteria and guidelines	18
2.1 Who teaches the first year?	7	8.1 Assessment guidelines or spoon-feeding?	18
2.2 Size of department	8	8.2 Assessment guidelines and transition	18
2.3 The semiotics of presence	8	8.3 How much guidance is appropriate?	18
2.4 The pros and cons of using sessional staff	8	8.4 Student guides	19
3. Status of students in programmes	9	9. The development of knowledge and skills	19
3.1 Deployment of core modules within different programmes	9	9.1 Can they be separated?	19
3.2 When do students decide their status?	9	9.2 The development of skills	20
3.3 Transfer between programmes	9	9.3 Who teaches skills?	20
4. Bridging strategies	10	9.4 Embedded or centralised?	20
4.1 Knowledge of A Levels	10	9.5 What skills should be taught?	20
4.2 'Undoing the damage'	10	9.6 Expected competencies and skills pitching	21
4.3 Taking risks	11	9.7 Other skills	21
4.4 Encouraging risk during discussion	11	9.8 Who needs it?	22
4.5 With whom are we building bridges?	11	10. Conclusions	22
5. Cores and options	11	Appendices	23
5.1 Core modules and curriculum design	11	Appendix 1: Summary of first year provision	23
5.2 The survey/theory model	12	Appendix 2: Case Study – The University of Derby	24
5.3 Assessing the cores	12	Appendix 3: Case Study – The University of Wolverhampton	26
5.4 Introducing skills	12	Appendix 4: Case Study – Sheffield Hallam University	28
5.5 The function of options in the first year	12	References	30
6. Teaching and learning strategies	13		
6.1 Lecture- seminar- tutorial- workshop	13		
6.2 Student contributions	13		
6.3 Presentations	14		
6.4 Mixed ability cohorts	14		

Foreword

Jonathan Gibson
English Subject Centre

What is the best way to introduce first-year undergraduates to English studies? In the past, English departments seem, on occasion, almost to have relished the discomfort of new students, seeking to induce a kind of existential trauma. Freshers were told that doing English literature at university would involve a radically new approach to texts, disturbingly different from the old-fashioned nonsense they had been taught at school: it was time to grow up. To what extent is this 'shock and awe' strategy sustainable in the twenty-first century? It can arguably still pay remarkable dividends, opening up new intellectual perspectives and changing lives. Yet the message of David Ellis's eloquent and timely report is that, by and large, today's circumstances require a gentler, more constructive approach – waterwings and floats rather than a push off into the deep end of the pool.

In at the Deep End? forms part of a suite of recent Subject Centre publications on the school-university interface. In *Four Perspectives on Transition: English Literature from Sixth Form to University* (Report 10, February 2005), Andrew Green surveyed the opinions of sixth-form students and their teachers and first-year university students and their lecturers on the topic of the transition from school to higher education. An important context for the suggestive mismatches in perception and expectation uncovered by Green – the changing nature of A Level teaching in the wake of Curriculum 2000 – was provided by Barbara Bleiman and Lucy Webster in *English at A Level: A Guide for Lecturers in Higher Education* (Report 12, August 2006). Green's work on English Literature was complemented for English Language in Angela Goddard's and Adrian Beard's *As Simple as ABC? Issues of Transition for Students of English Language A Level going on to study English Language/Linguistics in Higher Education* (Report 14, March 2007). Our most recent publications have built on the evidence opened out by Green, Bleiman and Webster and Goddard and Beard to consider concrete ways in which university English departments can address the situation. Andrew Green's *Teaching the Teachers: Higher Education and the Continuing Professional Development of English Teachers* (Report 16, February 2008) – complemented by his forthcoming guide for English lecturers on working with secondary education – puts under the spotlight activities run by higher education institutions with or for schools. In focusing on the design of first-year curricula, *In at the Deep End?* very valuably brings all this material back home to lecturers' most immediate concerns: the day-to-day business of university teaching. Whilst the report focusses on literature, many of the issues discussed and experiences highlighted have parallels in language teaching.

Anecdotal evidence from lecturers suggests that, for a number of reasons – greater social diversity in our student intake and shifts in the school curriculum, to name just two – the 'transition' from school to university is more awkward for more students than ever before. In the short and medium term, it is far easier for university departments to address this bumpiness than schools: the details of degree programmes are within the gift of the English lecturers who run them, whereas what teachers do in their classrooms is highly circumscribed by guidance from the QCA and the examination boards.

For this reason, we need, as Dr Ellis argues below, to be as clear as possible about what we are trying to do in our first-year programmes. We must ask fundamental – even simplistic – questions. What are the things we would like our students to be able to do at the end of their first year? What kinds of modules, lectures, seminar activities, workshops and assessment types would be best suited to help develop these attributes? How can we make sure that first-years are getting the feedback they need to improve their work? How can we help them adapt from a régime predicated on extensive class time to a way of life centred on independent study?

Designing a first-year programme is not a straightforward process: the issues and variables obtaining from institution to institution are complex, and one size most certainly does not fit all. This report is built around a recognition of these complexities. Rather than laying down a set of 'best practice' recommendations, it ushers us into a rich and stimulating conversation about possibilities. In the pages that follow, you will find reflections on a wide range of topics, many of them with implications reaching well beyond the first year. What ideas you find most useful will, of course, depend on your own departmental and institutional context and on the intellectual priorities of your modules. As you work on the design and implementation of your first-year programmes, I hope that this guide will be an invaluable resource.

Introduction

What do you want your first year curriculum to do?

Is it a conversion period where A Level students are weaned off their secondary level practices and taught how to be undergraduates?

Is it an opportunity to achieve a level playing field of knowledge and skills before moving into the 'real business' of the second and third year modules?

Is it an opportunity to carry out post-admission screening to determine the individual needs of new students?

Is it really part of the degree, or is it a preparatory period?

Does it build coherently upon the strengths developed during A Level study, or does it strike a dramatic note of difference, signalling to students that University English is different in kind to pre-undergraduate study, and that is what makes it so important, so exciting?

Maybe it is intended to be none of those things.

Maybe it is a carefully planned bridge between A Level study and second and third year study – a time of supported transition rather than conversion. But, despite this, perhaps students (irritatingly) consider that the first year 'doesn't really count', since no grades awarded during it go forward to their final degree classification.

Perhaps your colleagues shy away from teaching in the large survey modules that typify many English programmes, seeking instead opportunities later in the programme to bring their research expertise and enthusiasm to bear on modules where students have developed their skills and passions for the subject in a more detailed manner.

In any case, how do you make the choices between what is considered essential or core knowledge? Should historical depth be privileged over geographical breadth? If so, do we begin with the Renaissance, the Medieval or Old English periods of literature? Or should the Classics be our starting point? What about theoretical approaches? Do we save them until the second year or bring them into the first by a form of stealth, or do we ask students to start reading theory in the raw from the outset? Do we decide there are different core demands for a single honours student, as compared to a joint or minor student? If so what differences would they be?

How do we assess? What proportion of assessment might involve language or creative writing? Are we responsible for developing study skills? What about e-learning? Is retention a problem? Should pedagogy be influenced by student preference? How much influence does the institution have on our freedom of choice in these areas?

Most colleagues involved in the planning, design or maintenance of a degree programme in English will recognise some or all of these questions. Some may be disappointed to learn that it is not the ambition of this report to answer them or to make any recommendations one way or another. Of course, there are a number of significant variables here that impede any universal template for curriculum design. For example, how English is constituted at different universities does vary significantly in terms of its concentration upon literature, English literature, language and/or linguistics or creative writing as either cognate combinations or as interrelated components of the same subject. Similarly, different departments will vary in size with regard both to the staff base and to the numbers of students enrolled. The internal organisation of universities with regard to the compositions of Schools or the functioning of a university-wide credit accumulation system may also have a determining effect upon academic planning within the department.

Despite (or perhaps due to) these, and many other, variations between institutions, however, the research for this report did find a significant degree of consistency between English departments. This was evident in the perceived difficulties of the first year experience for students, the strategies and concerns upon which curriculum design is based and in a shared sense of continued vigilance and reflection in the desire to 'get it right'. To slightly alter Philip Martin's original meaning, "the discipline of English has been continually obsessed with debating contesting claims for validity from its beginnings" (Martin, 2006, p.1): it is the obsession with 'beginnings' that was the common thread in this research.

Methodology

In order to draw out useful points of comparison and distinction, I employed a standard questionnaire that sought to identify what the successes and challenges of first year curriculum design in English at different institutions might be. This was then used as the basis for a series of interviews carried out in 2005 with key personnel such as first year tutors, subject leaders or department heads. The questionnaire was divided into issues of structure (i.e. modularisation, semesters or terms, use of core and elective), content (i.e. period, genre, theory, skills, language components) and teaching, learning and assessment strategies. The interviews lasted for about an hour each, were recorded and transcribed later.

My 'target' institutions comprised a small sample of ten English departments in both old and post-1992 universities. My initial intention was to survey universities in towns and cities that held more than one university to see if local competition influenced curriculum design in any way. However, it soon became clear that this was not a determining factor; rather that it was the shared principles and concerns relating to the nature of the subject that were predominant.

In addition to the interviews, I attended two English Subject Centre events, one at Bristol University in 2005 and another at Keele University in 2007, each dedicated to issues of transition and first year curricula. I was also fortunate to attend the Queen Mary Consortium on Writing in the Disciplines at the University of London in 2006. At each event, I found that both the formal presentations and the informal conversations with colleagues strongly echoed the sentiments expressed through my interviews. From these experiences, I have drawn some confidence that, while this report does not actually offer model solutions to the problem of the first year, it will, I hope, enable others to put their own concerns and ideas into a broader and representative context.

Throughout the report, I shall also draw on some other recent and complementary key documents on issues of transition and design, including the 2007 QAA Subject Benchmarks and pertinent Subject Centre reports. Influenced by the latter, particularly Andrew Green's report on transition, (Green, 2005) I carried out some preliminary research through questionnaires completed by students of English at the University of Derby and the University of Wolverhampton. A further questionnaire was circulated to students during their induction talk for English at Wolverhampton University in September 2007. Based on Green's methodology, it was designed to provide comparisons between what students had experienced in terms of reading, assessment and contact prior to undergraduate work, against what they expected would form part of their activities as an undergraduate student. The Derby questionnaire was distributed to a class of students towards the end of their second year in 2005/06. Its intention was to gauge the performance of the first year curriculum at Derby in both building upon pre-entry study and preparation for second year study. For this reason, the questionnaire was not aimed at students just completing their first year. Much of what I discovered through this research seemed commensurate with conversations and documents described above.

The Report

What this report consists of, then, is a narrativised selection of key statements or assertions drawn from the interviews in conjunction with evidence or assertions from wider research. I have deliberately left the statements taken from the interviews unattributed, as I believe them to be representative of a number of respondents, rather than being specific to the institution. I should add, though, that the interpretations that I have placed upon these statements are my own, as are any recommendations that I draw from them.

I also include in the Appendices three case studies of first year curricula drawn from my research. Each programme has one or two defining characteristics that are representative both of a range of activities in first year design and/or contain distinctive

variations on broad practice across the sector. My intention here is to provide detailed evaluations of existing practices, rather than to promote these programmes as being superior in construction and implementation to others encountered during my research. It should also be acknowledged that some changes will have occurred in these departments since the original research due to changes to the staff membership and the normal cycle of review and revalidation.

Definitions

I should make some definitions before proceeding. In the course of interviewing colleagues (I'll call them respondents henceforth) I asked them to respond primarily with regard to their English or English Studies degrees, rather than language, linguistic or creative writing degrees. As you will see, however, these disciplines are recurrent in the report anyway. I will also be writing primarily about the transition for A Level students into higher education. I am aware that most programmes do not recruit solely from this cohort of students, but it true that such students do remain the largest single constituent of most first year programmes and that proportion is growing. This is not to suggest that non-traditional applicants or those with Scottish Highers are unimportant.

Finally, there are variations in what have been termed 'institutional lexicons'. For the purposes of this report I shall refer to the First Year (rather than Stage, Level or Phase), to core or optional modules (rather than mandatory and elective), to single honours students (rather than specialists), to programmes (rather than degrees, awards, courses, pathways, schemes etc), to departments (rather than course or programme teams), to institutions (rather than universities), to Schools (rather than Faculties), to A Level students (rather than post-16), to sessional lecturers (rather than visiting lectures or casual staff or hourly-paid) and finally, rather reluctantly, to Learning Centres (rather than to Libraries). I do so purely for my own convenience.

1.0 English within the universities

The emphasis given to particular aspects of subject knowledge will vary from institution to institution and from programme to programme (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 3.1).

Individual degree programmes will choose to place the emphasis on developing particular abilities and skills (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 3.2).

1.1 The autonomy of programme design

The design and implementation of any University award programme will be the product of the complex inter-relationships of a variety of local and universal factors. We all make reference to Subject Benchmarks, the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), and diversity and equality legislation in determining the principles and rationale for broad design. We also work with key skills descriptors in establishing overall teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) strategies. Programme Specification Templates (PST) are themselves universal documents to be placed on the internet in order to meet 'student satisfaction' requirements. These can also influence the way we think and express our ambitions for the programme, often to the detriment of the demand to make such documents 'student-friendly'.

At the most local level, programme design will also be influenced by the individuals who constitute the subject team. This will be felt in terms, not just of research interests or teaching expertise, but also in terms of individual motivation to establish new elements of programme design. For example, some colleagues will want to introduce new initiatives in e-learning or skills modules or postgraduate programmes, whilst others will want to consolidate established practices due to student popularity or their comparatively recent entry to the profession. As one respondent put it to me, "programmes are rarely new. Instead, they tend to evolve – and often not with any great speed".

Sandwiched between the universal and the local is the framework imposed upon any department by a combination of institutional or School regulations. Such influences will range from:

- potential limits on the number of core modules in any one year;
- a demand that students take modules from other areas;
- the centralised timetabling of an examination period or periods;
- the number and credit-rating of modules that comprise each year;
- expected contact hours for each module;
- the point at which students finally decide the title of their degree;
- the context of modularisation and/or semesterisation;
- the contribution of first year grades to the final degree;
- institutional norms with regard to class sizes or module populations.

Variations in these and other determinants beyond the power of the subject teams will frequently impose defining characteristics upon the programme itself.

One of the challenges presented by such determinants with specific regard to first year curricula is to build a coherent programme that promotes a sense of course identity from which first year students can achieve a sense of shared affiliation with the course. As will be explored later (see Section 3 below), this aim will be further complicated by the status of students in the programme as single honours, major, joint, minor or combined students and indeed by the extent to which such titles pertain in the first year at all.

A successful first year curriculum will enjoy the benefits of achieving a sense of a common purpose between cohorts of students and between students and staff. Often, respondents felt that institutional regulations impeded this:

The first year pass only – it's a University policy. This is often a problem, as they treat it as a pass or fail year, not an opportunity to progress and develop.

We have seen what I would call a homogenisation [of student performance] as a consequence of going modular.

The key thing is retention, to get them engaged. If students are to make the transition from college to university, we need to get them motivated, to start thinking critically: foundation work isn't treading water. The pass-fail first year can demotivate.

1.2 Retention as a model for design

A well-planned first year curriculum can improve retention, but it cannot, on its own, solve it.

Concerns about retaining students vary from institution to institution (and from course to course). Variations amongst the institutions I visited could be linked fairly directly to the pressures placed upon admissions. Broadly speaking, those who selected students and placed a high tariff on entry requirements expressed fewer concerns in this regard than those who recruited students (insofar as they have lower entry requirements and continue to enrol students during Clearing). In both instances, however, there was recognition that the first year was the period during which students were most likely to exit their course early. As a consequence, retention, whether an institutional priority or not, was an influencing factor on the delivery and content of first year curricula.

For some, this was not so much a concern as a positive feature of higher education and what it is meant to achieve for students. Students who transferred to another course were not felt to be lost to the institution (as a source of HEFCE funding) and, therefore, some matching up of developing interests and the availability of new discipline areas at undergraduate level as part of the first year was felt to be a good thing for students' long term development. Similarly, some institutions do not expect students to make a decision on the name of their award until the end of that first year, in order specifically to encourage a flexible attitude towards the subject area. Others oblige students to take inter- or multidisciplinary modules as part of their first year for the same reasons. In short, there was a heartening interest in students' enjoyment of, and intellectual development within, higher education: more than might be assumed in a world apparently dominated by managerialist target-setting.

That said, I did find instances where concerns over student retention within, or progression from, the first year did influence

design. Typically, this was an issue of content and perceived difficulty. Almost all institutions I visited employed the common practice of teaching theory ‘by stealth’, or ‘soft theory’ modules, in the first year. As described further below (see 3.1), such theoretically driven modules (often core) are intended to widen students’ perspectives on reading and writing about literature, but the task of engaging directly with such writing is typically held over until the second or third year modules. Similarly, there was a deliberate policy in some departments on including a good proportion of contemporary writing in the first year. It was felt that students could deal with this more readily than, for example, Renaissance or Medieval writing and could therefore concentrate more on new forms of analysis and synthesis than on comprehension. My impression (and I cannot put it more strongly than that) is that departments within institutions concerned about lower retention rates were more likely to respond to student preference/ability than those where retention was less of an issue. I would also emphasise that such responsiveness was neither a compromise of pedagogic principle nor necessarily a bad thing.

Within this context, though, there were some shared strategies aimed at improving retention that also had clear potential for enhancing the first-year experience on a more general basis.

1.2.1 Early assessment

As demonstrated by Charts 1 and 2 below, students typically have two main concerns upon entering university: will they be good enough academically and will they make any friends?

Chart 1 – Anticipation

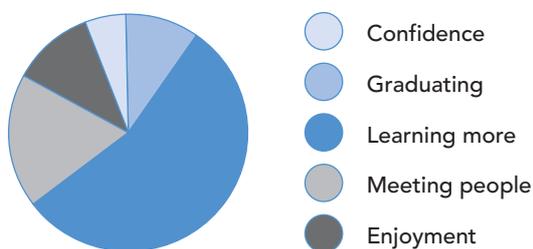
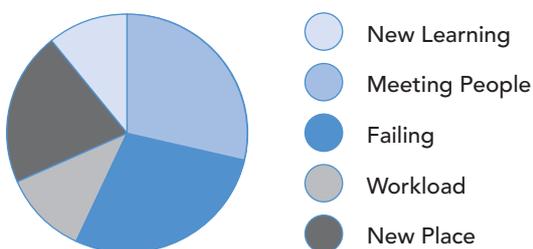


Chart 2 – Apprehension



Source: Induction questionnaire employed at Wolverhampton University in 2007. Students were given an open question asking them to name one thing that they were looking forward to at university and one thing that made them feel most apprehensive.

A simple way to deal with the first issue is to provide an early point of assessment. In at least one institution this included a form of test during Induction. This would typically be aimed at students’ writing skills, rather than their subject knowledge and would be an early warning system of any specific and individual needs. Within modules (typically, core ones), early

assessment is a way in which students can, hopefully, have their ability to succeed at this level confirmed. This practice has been supported by Royal Literary Fund Fellows, Husain and Waterfield, who state: “Some diagnostic system ... needs to be in place in Higher Education institutions for the early identification of the problems that students have. Diagnosis could be achieved either by a separate test or perhaps more economically, by specialist examination of students’ first essays” (Davies, 2006).

The language here is of diagnosis and remediation, rather than confidence-building. However, where such practices were in place, respondents felt that these played an important part in beginning the process of transition to higher education through assessment guidance and formative feedback. Students were thus also inducted into a new relationship with their learning in terms of their own responsibilities for reflection upon and improving their own performance. Thus, the emphasis is not solely upon providing a grade. “Feedback is crucial,” noted one respondent, adding, “we need to get them out of the school idea of recording achievement and towards the notion of reflection on how they learn and what they are learning and why.”

Example of Practice 1

The English team at Derby University piloted an on-line, multiple choice test for use during Induction. It was a four part exercise in which students completed tasks on grammar, summary, use of quotations and logical sequencing. The software generated a ‘score’ but students would also have to write a paragraph explaining their choices and this was most productively used in the first meeting between students and their personal tutors in assessing strengths and weaknesses.

As part of a School-wide initiative, students at Wolverhampton University are also asked to write a 600 word passage during Induction which is then assessed by a dedicated writing support tutor who will, again, identify areas of weakness.

1.2.2 Student interactions

In addition to providing an academic context within which students could start to feel comfortable as soon as possible, many respondents thought it made sense to facilitate the growth of peer groups and friendships amongst students. This is not to suggest that academics should become social secretaries for students (I suspect we’d be pretty poor at this). However, organising teaching and learning activities in such a way as to promote student conversation and interaction can combine usefully with extra-curricular activities such as guest speakers, staff-student seminars or theatre visits. These can enable students to simultaneously reinforce their affiliation with the subject, whilst finding other students with similar interests and/or approaches to study in a mutually compatible fashion. Encouraging such relationships early on in the curriculum should promote an atmosphere in seminars that might counteract long-term and familiar concerns about student passivity:

Seminars aren’t there to be a teacher-led. I think that’s a crucial difference – you’ve got to get that in early.

[Good student relations] ought to mean it's more of an exchange of views, than a mini-lecture.

The setting-up of peer-assisted learning groups – student-led groups running alongside lecturer led seminars – can be a useful approach too.

1.2.3 Interactions with staff

Quickly establishing a relationship with the departmental staff, as well as other students, was also felt to be important. In some universities this is achieved through the regular presence of staff in the first year modules and/or during induction activities, so students quickly associate names with faces and develop a sense of a personal relationship with the course. However, as explored below (see Section 2), frequently it is in the first year where senior staff members tend to be replaced with sessional tutors or postgraduate students. This can impede a sense of course identity and increase a sense of estrangement from the university (often contributing to feelings of homesickness and isolation).

1.3 Personal tutors

Some institutions employ a system of personal tutors to give students a more human and individualised contact with the department. This is usually implemented through a series of meetings with both administrative and pastoral outcomes attached to them. However, few respondents saw personal tutor systems as having a significant effect upon induction or retention. Typically, this was because students saw this facility as an extra-curricular safety net that was of value if things go wrong, but not terribly relevant otherwise. Either that, or students saw them as a forum for getting a second opinion on their assessed work or as an 'on demand' opportunity for one-to-one academic advice. One variation on this was not related to retention or staff-student relations as such, but will probably sound familiar:

One personal tutee was demanding I help her to get a First – 'Where's my money going to?' was the implication.

1.4 Attendance policies

A Level students are typically given a full timetable that insists upon daily classes. This is not the case in university-level English, where weekly contact time will be considerably lower and certainly does not require daily attendance. Instead the emphasis is placed upon students carrying out set reading tasks in preparation for taught classes, or carrying out independent research for assessments.

For many respondents, this shift from highly organised activities to self-managed study is one of the most important progressions from pre-university to university patterns of study. It is also something which receives little attention in helping students make the transition, as the comparatively liberal regimes of university life can start students in poor habits. (See Green, 2005)

Universities themselves take differing attitudes to attendance, particularly following the shift from grants to loans as students become customers to whom the university owes a service, rather than funded individuals who owe a responsibility to their funding bodies. Compelling attendance, or attaching penalties for poor attendance, is quite rare. The commonly used analogy of attending university and having membership of a gym is meaningful here. Academics can say that they provide the facilities

and equipment for students to have a 'toned mind' but they cannot enforce their use. This does quite properly suggest that students have to take responsibility for their own learning, but it also suggests that compulsory attendance is not appropriate to the context of university English. On the other hand, a number of institutions see regular attendance as a means of improving retention, since disengagement with the course is a major contributing factor to students discontinuing their studies.

Where debates about monitoring and enforcing attendance have taken place, these have been the common issues raised:

- institutions need to be realistic about the demands placed upon students with regard to part-time work or family responsibilities and any punitive measures would effectively penalise students who are already carrying extra-curricular burdens by comparison with those students able to concentrate solely upon their studies.
- a disciplined framework would benefit students initially. This is borne out by an analogous preference for module choices to be limited, so students do not have to think about what options to take. Conversely, some think that it is exactly this kind of decision-making that is an essential part of undergraduates' development.
- some institutions monitor seminar attendance rather than lecture attendance, since the former has an implicit contract requiring student participation to function effectively.
- some institutions have dedicated retention officers who contact students noted as having failed to attend a certain number of classes in sequence or who have failed to attend a certain percentage.
- some respondents saw attendance policies implemented at an institutional level as putting them in the position of being a combination of school teacher and truancy officer, and felt this was inappropriate both to their post and to the university ethos in general.
- others felt that, as long as the administrative support was in place and this did not represent a new and significant burden, the growth in student numbers in the sector overall demanded enforced attendance (within reasonable limits) as part of a mutual contract of responsibilities.

2.0 The deployment of staff across the degree

2.1 Who teaches the first year?

How department heads organise the staffing of first-year curricula is typically influenced by practical responses to the number of permanent staff available to teach across the three year curriculum, and to the strategic use of individuals' research specialisms. It is, of course, equally true that postgraduate students or very recently qualified and appointed staff also have areas of specialism to pass on. But the long-term planning of a programme must be based upon the permanent staff base and this is typically where the more senior staff will be located.

It has, then, to be acknowledged that teaching on the first-year modules is relatively unpopular amongst permanent staff who, not unreasonably, would like to see their expertise and

enthusiasm for a topic given the opportunities for detailed study that do not exist in the large survey modules. In short, staffing first-year modules has its own particular difficulties, more so in the common situation where the first year syllabus is composed of a small number of generic core modules. The result, typically, is the widespread use of sessional staff in the first year, more so than will be the case in the latter two years:

Quite a lot of the [seminar] teaching is done by hourly paid staff – I do all of the lectures or 90%.

Who teaches on it [i.e. the first year] very much depends on how the options work out.

Research-led teaching occurs more in the second and third years.

We don't want to go the way of US universities with regard to [not] having senior staff on first year modules ... so we established a rota of at least one in three years.

2.2 Size of department

The number of permanent staff available to teach in the first year will clearly be important here. In some of the smaller teams I met, lecturers would be employed across the curriculum as a matter of necessity, and often cited strong staff-student relations as a key feature of their programme. Larger departments that often also have a sizeable postgraduate community are under less pressure to teach across the curriculum but also operate under greater pressures to meet publication targets for the RAE. These conflicting demands and the widening gulf between 'research' departments and 'teaching' departments are unlikely to change in the near future. However, it is also true that students (and their parents) are becoming increasingly aware of what they are 'getting for their money' and students returning from their first weeks at university complaining that they are never taught by permanent staff are becoming anecdotally more frequent.

2.3 The semiotics of presence

We think it very important that first-year teaching is something all colleagues can do.

It was certainly true that, while respondents did acknowledge the difficulties surrounding staffing the first year, they also recognised, and were addressing, its significance. Each respondent emphasised the importance of having all members of staff involved regularly, if not constantly, in the delivery of first year modules. In part, this was based upon notions of equity or workload and the logical fit of, for example, a Victorianist teaching the 'Introduction to the Victorian Novel' lecture. However, there are other, equally practical reasons for this kind of planning.

Firstly, it is commonly reported that students do not take the first year seriously due to its lack of final weighting: 'It doesn't count'; 'You only need to pass', etcetera. Institutions do seem, through such regulations, to communicate a sense to students that the first year is unimportant. This can be reinforced by programme teams without a strong presence of senior academics teaching on first-year modules, since this carries with it the same implication of value.

Where an institution requires students to make decisions about the nature of their award only at the end of the first year, it seems even more important to have senior staff involved during the first year. In their absence, there is a lack of apparent coherence between the two levels, as students will neither know nor have built up a relationship with those academics who will be teaching them in future years. As one respondent suggested, the presence of permanent staff in the first year is important, "otherwise they [students] get to the second year and don't know who the senior members of staff are." There will therefore be an absence of subject identity that can adversely affect the way students perceive themselves in relation to their subject.

2.4 The pros and cons of using sessional staff

Part-time staff aren't as available and we can't use them as personal tutors, so a lot of first years have personal tutors who don't teach them ... [students thus have] practical concerns about access.

From the students' point of view, a member of staff is a member of staff.

Postgraduate teachers haven't got the bottle to send students away to read the text under discussion [if they have not done so].

Postgraduate taught modules are proving to be very attractive to students.

Where first year modules were being staffed by postgraduates or recently qualified sessionals, all respondents were keen to point out the careful selection and monitoring of their work to ensure students continued to get highly competent teachers. There were also instances either where in-house courses had been designed or other mechanisms – formal or otherwise – had been put into place to support relatively inexperienced tutors who would not necessarily get the same professional induction as newly appointed full-time academics.

In addition to this, some respondents suggested that employing postgraduate students as seminar tutors enriched the learning experience, as such tutors' recent experiences of being a student themselves made them more empathetic towards the students and consequently more approachable. Others noted that new tutors were still enthused, eager and active in their preparation and delivery of seminars and more flexible with regard to the content. In short, students' experiences might be enhanced by such a presence in the seminar room.

There was also a sense that students might be willing to discuss their concerns with a member of staff they felt had an 'indirect' relationship to the permanent team. Consequently, they would feel more comfortable expressing any doubts, criticisms or uncertainties about either themselves or the course, under circumstances that would be less likely to give them a reputation for the whole of the three years. In this respect, sessional staff can be a very useful source of informal contact for first-year undergraduates (and a valuable source of feedback about the programme).

There were, however, also reservations about employing postgraduate or inexperienced staff if they were not properly supported. One respondent pointed to the importance of positive module evaluations for colleagues still trying to gain

a foothold in the sector. For example, a more experienced colleague might risk becoming unpopular in the short term and oblige unwilling students to contribute to seminar discussions, or s/he might take a stronger line on students who arrive unprepared for the class. Less experienced tutors might also be more prone to filling in the gaps in such situations, fearing that negative responses might impede their opportunities for more, or permanent, employment. Thus the importance of the seminar as a forum for student activity will be lost.

Clearly, there are no fixed rules in these kinds of judgements. Experience does not rob academics of their enthusiasm for teaching as a matter of course or necessarily imbue them with advanced teaching skills. Similarly, postgraduate students are just as vulnerable to the demands of research timetables as any other academic, and will often be obliged to constantly write new teaching materials, rather than being able to reuse existing ones.

Here, as elsewhere, final decisions will invariably be based upon the practicalities of the availability of staff connected to department size and its research culture. However, even where such circumstances do encourage the use of sessional staff in the first year and permanent staff in the second and third year, this should not prevent the subject team as a whole taking an interest in the design, delivery and success of the first year curriculum. If the subject team collectively is not able to articulate the importance and significance of the first year programme as an intrinsic part of the degree, it is difficult to see why students should do so.

3.0 Status of students in programmes

Graduates who have studied English as a significant component of their degree will have acquired a range of complementary literary, linguistic and critical skills (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 3.2).

3.1 Deployment of core modules within different programmes

In designing first-year curricula and making decisions about core modules, we also make decisions about what we consider to be essential for all students dependent upon their status in single honours or joint pathways. For example, it is not uncommon for single honours students to be assigned more core English modules in their programme than those following a joint pathway. In part, such decisions may be made with reference to subject benchmarks. More significantly, they are a defining aspect of the programme overall, often leading to further cores in the second and sometimes third year. The most common practice I found was the use of a 'soft theory' module as the shared core for all students with a 'significant component' of English in their programme, with the historical survey module more likely to be core for single honours students only. Perhaps this is an indication of an emphasis upon subject-specific skills, rather than knowledge, (see 9.1 below for further discussion of these cognitive splits), since these are modules intended to improve and widen the ways in which students read and write about literature, rather than broaden their knowledge of different forms of literature. The historical survey modules then become part of the optional

programme for joint programme students. This situation may say something about the balance of priorities within our subject area.

What this issue may also entail is the content and teaching of the theory modules themselves. With the widest possible 'audience', module designers may have to be aware that, as one respondent put it, "on that introductory course we have a lot of minor students who may not have an [English] A Level at all." This might be one reason why there is a general preference for engaging students with theoretically-driven approaches to literary production without the requirement to read the theorists in the original texts.

The study of language as part of the first year generated rather less consensus. One respondent, when asked 'What emphasis is placed upon language rather than literature (in your programme)?' replied, "none: it's an English Literature programme." Whilst another's response to the same question was, "literature and language are not mutually exclusive!" This potential area of divergence was evident in some examples of programme design. One department made a language module a core component for their first-year single honours students, but not thereafter (see Appendix 3). Another department restricted to single honours students a core module combining language competence and writing skills and leading directly to a second year module with a similar emphasis (see Appendix 2). More recent debates over what has been termed by some as a 'return to practical criticism', suggest a renewed emphasis on close reading/attentiveness to linguistic effect that will bring this issue of language and literature into sharper focus.

3.2 When do students decide their status?

If the first year is a preparatory one, then, in some institutions, students only make a firm decision about the title of their degree at the beginning of year two. Or, even where students do arrive having been admitted into a single honours programme in English, they will often still be obliged to elect modules from outside the subject area. In such cases (and, as noted in 1.1 above, this could be an institutional policy), first year curricula may be designed to expose students to academic disciplines that are not widely offered at A Level, for example American Studies or Creative Writing.

As academics (and issues of devolved budgets notwithstanding) we can see the virtues of this model. We want students to develop intellectually during their undergraduate programmes and exposing them to multi- and inter-disciplinary ways of thinking can be a meaningful way of achieving this. However, resistance to this is frequent amongst students. Common responses are that they have made an informed choice about the degree they wish to pursue and struggle to see the immediate relevance of stepping outside that discipline itself. This is more the case, clearly, with single honours programmes than joint awards. Where there is resistance, there can again be a sense that the degree does not start properly until the second year when, typically, there are more options for modules from within the subject area than in the first.

3.3 Transfer between programmes

A further issue related to the deployment of core modules in relation to joint and single honours students and the different structures available to single honours or joint students, is the

issue of transfer either internally between programmes or externally from other institutions. Again, this situation is most likely to occur in the first year due to a range of personal and academic factors, so first-year syllabuses could be designed to take account of it.

Frequent issues raised in this regard by respondents were:

- the use of through-year modules can effectively prevent a student from entering at the end of the first semester. This structure will also inhibit students' ability to transfer to another university with full semester 1 credits, since the credits are awarded at the end of the year only.
- locating core modules in the first semester will expose students from the outset to ideas that are clearly regarded as important to the programme, but students joining that programme at the beginning of the second semester will not be able to pick up that module until they are in their second year.

4.0 Bridging strategies

"If, in expressing their love of reading, as most students entering degree level English study do, the exercise to which they refer is essentially different to the activity university courses demand of them, this is indeed a deep problem." (Green, 2005, p. 79).

It's about creating a bridge – knowing where they are and where you want to get them by the end of the first year.

What we want to achieve in the first year is acquired skills to work at university level. An introduction to the major genres, the beginning of chronological scope: a balance of historical knowledge and skills up to University level.

What we thought we were doing well [in our first year] wasn't what the students thought we did well.

I'd much rather they made mistakes in their first year.

4.1 Knowledge of A Levels

There is now a growing body of work based upon what A Levels are setting out to do and how the knowledge and skills generated at that level can be built upon in first year undergraduate curricula and beyond (see Green, 2005; Barlow, 2004 and Bleiman and Webster, 2006). There does, however, seem to be a continuing gulf between the two qualifications. Many respondents' knowledge of A Level was based either upon their own experience, their children's, or on anecdotal evidence, a knowledge gap likely to be widened by further changes to A Levels being introduced in autumn 2008. However, this should not be taken purely as a form of determined ignorance. As Barlow points out, "students arriving at university will have had very different experiences of English at A Level". For example, he notes that the textual requirement for English Language and Literature A Level is "precisely half" that of English Literature, with "no requirement for a Shakespeare or pre-1770 text" (Barlow, 2004 p. 52). So, A Levels in English do not provide a certain base upon which to design undergraduate programmes, and this focus on A Levels excludes a sizeable minority of students at all institutions who do not have (recent) A Levels on entry anyway. It is also worth noting the considerable

sense of insecurity expressed by students in Charts 1 and 2 above (p.7). Whatever prior attainments students bring with them to university, they do not seem to engender self-confidence in achieving a successful adjustment to university study.

Consequently, a reasonable response to the question, 'How has knowledge of A Level curricula influenced your first-year syllabus?' was "none in terms of content, but we are paying more attention to students' study skills and their ability to make the transition from A Level to University". How this transition might effectively be achieved remains unclear, and I saw no real commonality of practice in this regard, but there were shared concerns or points of issue that emerged.

4.2 'Undoing the damage'

This is probably overstated, but there seemed to me to be at least an even split in first-year curricula between building upon the skills with which students arrive and using the first year as a time for inducting students into a different way of learning. A recurrent issue was that of reading, falling into three categories:

- close reading skills;
- reading quickly and efficiently;
- reading widely and for synthesis.

Most respondents felt that A Level students did arrive with well-developed skills in the close analysis of literary texts (a view confirmed by both Green and Bleiman and Webster). However, while this remains a key skill for our discipline, the emphasis upon it is said to be achieved to the detriment of the latter two categories of reading that are taken to be a defining feature of – and therefore a key point of difficulty in transition to – undergraduate study.

Bleiman and Webster suggest that "students' wide reading is often directed by their teachers and some teachers complain that even here students are often reluctant to take charge of their own learning" (p. 18). In so doing, they highlight a twin problem of narrow reading practices and teacher-dependency that was echoed by many respondents:

They're not used to having to read a novel a week - we don't expect them to know that text as thoroughly as at A Level.

The one thing that is quite important is to let students know that they aren't here to be taught.

Some A Level students are very teacher-dependent.

You have to reorient them away from those expectations [of close or text-centric reading].

They arrive with a very tunnel vision approach to what they are doing.

What they want is more time to work on more focused texts.

Alerting students to the need to learn additional ways of reading seems, then, to be a key challenge for first-year syllabuses and most colleagues will, I'm sure, recognise students' complaints that they are given 'too much reading to do'. How this can be achieved is less clear, hence, the lack of common practice in the sector. For example, if one provides a lot of guidance on what students should be doing and reading in preparation for classes, one runs the risk of maintaining the teacher-dependency

that A Level study is seen as producing. Or, if one reduces the reading requirements of primary texts in order to free up time to look at the application of contextual or critical material, then, again, there is the risk that students will get through the first year without, as one respondent put it, “learning how to read a long novel.” (I have, myself, been ‘guilty’ of discounting certain novels for first year modules because they were ‘too long’.)

4.3 Taking risks

Asking students to be more adventurous in the way they work with literature was a common idea and was often seen as an ‘antidote’ to A Level study. One respondent noted that we need to “combat the tactical learning that they’ve picked up at A Level” that discouraged such ambition. Green agrees, stating that, “Students need to be allowed... to learn to experiment with ideas. Such experimentation inevitably involves mistakes, short-comings, even failures” (p. 79). The widespread view was that A Level students are trained to be task-oriented and therefore they become adept at learning strategies that allow them to succeed according to certain criteria. The prospect of having what Colbert et al describe as “serious fun” (p. 84) is not something to which they have been attuned.

4.4 Encouraging risk during discussion

I will often say to my students that I would much rather they made mistakes in seminar discussions than in their essays. It might have an element of embarrassment in the first instance, but it will have no long term effect on their grades – apart from improving them – and whatever is learnt by making that mistake will be learnt by many others in the same group. Arguably, however, that is easy for me to say.

Green points out that “the predominance of the lecture and seminar format, both of which tend to operate with much larger groups than are ever experienced during post-16 education, are formats unfamiliar and threatening to many students” (p. 80). Students in the first year are often pre-occupied with establishing relations between themselves, coming to terms with new conventions of address, (am I ‘Sir’, ‘Dr Ellis’ or ‘Dave’ and do I expect students to raise their hand in order to speak?), whilst also trying to master new materials being taught to them in a different way and with different intended outcomes. Additionally, there are conventions of turn-taking to consider and learn. Regarding such activities as ‘skills’ is frequently derided by those opposed to the current emphasis on skills in higher education. However, lecturers’ complaints about student ‘passivity’ in seminars are not a new development (how many times has a student muttered something to you about being embarrassed for being the only one who speaks in seminar ‘discussions’?). Consequently, some *explicit* discussion with new students on how to prepare for and contribute to seminars seems to me to be an essential part of the first year curriculum.

4.5 With whom are we building bridges?

As identified by Barlow in 4.1 above, there is a range of A Level syllabuses being taught and, consequently, no single base upon which first year curricula can be designed (see also Bleiman and Webster, 2006). In addition to this, institutions do recruit students who come to university through other routes or after a considerable absence from formal education. This may reasonably account for the common notion that the first-year

curriculum has to assume effectively little or no knowledge, and function instead as a conversion or foundation year for the degree, with all the implications of its relative importance described above.

In some ways, this is exacerbated by the reliance of admissions departments upon A Level attainment as a criterion for selection and recruitment. I offer no solutions to this, but these are the apparent anomalies that emerged in the course of my research:

- high A Level achievement is not necessarily an indicator of final undergraduate success;
- good first-year grades can be about speed of conversion rather than, again, an indicator of final success;
- Access students (sadly seen to be falling in number) are widely regarded as being better prepared for undergraduate study than A Level students.

If anything can be taken from this it might be that higher education colleagues should seize any opportunities to shape A Level English (as some were able to in relation to the revisions due in autumn 2008) in order to influence the kind of students we receive. The alternative is a rather more passive concern for the apparent deficit model of students’ skills.

5.0 Cores and options

Whatever the overall structure, the relationship between the individual elements, and objectives of the course as a whole, should be coherent and explicit (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 4.5).

[Graduates should be able to demonstrate a] knowledge of literature and language, which in the case of literature should include a substantial number of authors and texts from different periods of literary history. For single honours students this should include knowledge of writing from periods before 1800. (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 3.1).

5.1 Core modules and curriculum design

As noted in 3.1 above, the significance of designating a module as ‘core’ has a direct bearing on the intended characteristics of different statuses of students engaged with the programme.

In addition to this, core modules can ensure that programmes explicitly respond to subject benchmarks in clearly measurable ways. For example, the above requirement that single honours students should engage with literature written before 1800 might be one rationale for ensuring that all such students take the historical survey module in the first year. On a perhaps more meaningful basis, core modules can be the principal vehicle through which a programme can achieve the coherence referred to in the first statement. In first-year curricula, specifically, such cores can be the most effective medium for ensuring that all students achieve what is often termed a ‘level playing field’ of knowledge and skills. Such modules can also provide a narrative thread running through the programme in

which the student can achieve a holistic view of the discipline area, as it is being taught at that institution (see QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 3.1).

5.2 The survey/theory model

By far the most common characteristic of first year curricula is the existence of core modules on historical survey and literary theory. Together, these core modules are intended to provide a broad historical awareness of period and genre and a more sophisticated approach to issues of literariness. In many cases, study skills components are embedded in these modules, in preference to a separate generic skills module (see 9.4 below). These modules can smooth out any discrepancies of knowledge in historical depth or breadth instigated by differing entry qualifications and begin the process of helping students to read and think about literature differently.

Most frequently, respondents saw such core modules as responding to a deficit model of students' prior attainment, rather than building upon existing skills. For example:

What we're trying to do is give them a variety of approaches that they don't get at A Level.

They've [first year students] got no sense of history or the linearity of narrative form.

In trying to address such deficits, however, respondents quickly noted conflicts that impeded transition and complicated curriculum design. For example, while most survey modules start with the Renaissance, as one respondent pointed out, "Renaissance drama and poetry are among the most difficult on the degree so logically they should be at the end." Furthermore, while another respondent noted that, "in order to be a more informed reader one has to become more aware of historical and political context", s/he noted a "resistance to new ways of reading: 'Why do I need to know about Marxism or the Wars of the Roses?'"

Such comments might simply confirm the idea that degree courses are different in kind to A Levels. But this would seem to further endorse the argument that the first-year curriculum should concentrate not just upon subject knowledge, but also – and substantially – on knowing the subject, and the skills and practices that constitute it.

5.3 Assessing the cores

If one does accept the rationale that cores should include approaches to literature that effectively define undergraduate (rather than A Level) study, then a similar attitude might be taken towards assessing these modules. I did find that there was fairly widespread consensus amongst my respondents that such modules would include assessment regimes that might build upon students' existing skills in essays and examinations, but also introduce new variations such as:

- assessments based upon annotated bibliographies (see 7.3.4);
- the use of e-resources both within and outside the Learning Centre;
- anti-plagiarism advice and referencing systems;
- reflective and/or creative components;

These are discussed in more detail in Section 7 below.

Example of Practice 2

In *Critical Theory 1* at Derby University, students are taught and partially assessed upon correct referencing and bibliographic techniques. As this module employs continuous assessment, the feedback proforma has a section on this with clear warning that failure to act upon the feedback where necessary will result on lowered grades.

At Wolverhampton University, a similar continuous assessment strategy is in place in *Introduction to Literature 1*. Here, for example, students must use (and correctly reference) e-resources such as Literature On-Line (LION) on tasks relating to intertextuality and allusion.

5.4 Introducing skills

As well as teaching key areas of knowledge and scholarly practice, these modules should also be a key forum for transition with regard to practical skills, for example:

- how to get the best out of seminars;
- how to produce work collaboratively within a group;
- how to plan and write undergraduate essays;
- how to read differently for undergraduate study.

It is a deceptively short list and, as one respondent put it, "addressing essential weaknesses in students' study skills can diminish the time available for subject coverage." However, the word 'essential' is significant to the overall point here, as I think the respondent was talking about genuine deficits in basic skills, rather than the introduction of possibly new ones. Nevertheless, such skills as described above (and in 9 below) have emerged in my research as being widely regarded as key to our discipline and will have to be taught somewhere. If they are introduced in the first-year curriculum within the context of redefining the subject area – and as an opportunity to take risks, rather than repeat existing practices – they can provide the sense of qualitative difference that both academics and students desire without representing a source of threat or anxiety.

5.5 The function of options in the first year

In a number of instances, first-year curricula do not include options. This is more prevalent with first semester curricula as a hard and fast rule, with the opportunity (or, in some cases, obligation) to elect modules from a menu of options appearing in the second semester.

The rationale for a restrictive first year (with the clear inference that choice would be expanded in the second and third year) was that it would, as noted above:

- provide a firm basis of literary knowledge upon which the latter stages of the curriculum could be designed;
- permit all students to make informed choices with regard to the latter stages of their degree;
- ensure that all students are exposed to the conventions, expectations and skills required for continued undergraduate study.

As one respondent put it, "I wouldn't call it restrictive, I'd call it a focussed provision that provides a meaningful structure upon which students can build."

One would also have to add at this stage that administratively, in terms of counselling, registration and enrolment, this is a much more efficient system of 'processing' students whilst also ensuring they have taken all the core options in their programme. Speaking with students, I also found that they do not generally consider fixed first year curricula to be an imposition or a restriction either, preferring the simplicity of this form of arrangement.

In one institution (see Example of Practice 3), freedom of choice is emphasised (with the same historical and theoretical content ensured through core modules). The rationale is that placing the responsibility upon students for choosing their programme of study from the outset is itself an initiation into the autonomous learning and independence of thought that higher education frequently characterises itself as achieving.

Example of Practice 3

Derby University offers at least eleven modules at each Level, with two cores and freedom to elect the remaining six modules both from this list and the opportunity for one elective from outside the programme. This was the widest range of choices I encountered in my research and was employed as a 'unique selling point' during Open Day presentations.

One final point in the core/option model concerns levels of attainment. One can argue that cores establish a shared foundation of knowledge and skills, but even with a well-policed pass/fail threshold, one wonders how much of this ground is actually shared between students who perform very well and those who achieve a minimum pass.

6.0 Teaching and learning strategies

Teaching arrangements in English programmes should provide a balance of direct instruction (or other form of provision of information) and the opportunity for active assimilation, questioning and debate. The focused discussion of writing lies at the heart of learning in the subject. It is important that students are able to engage in dialogue, and develop and negotiate conclusions with others, which is a key component in the acquisition of both subject-specific and transferable skills. (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 4.3).

For good academic discourse to flourish, the classroom environment should offer immediate feedback on drafts, talks and journals, a focus on high-level goals, and sufficient time, in staged assignments, to develop an argument rather than turning to highly efficient but low-investment strategies based upon retelling information (Pieterick, 2007).

[There is] the grade-focused mentality of the secondary school system, and its (understandable) tendency to spoon-feed students rather than develop their critical abilities (Davies, 2006 p. 28).

[Developing students' skills] will best be achieved through discursive forms, such as the essay... Nevertheless, there are many stages on the way to do this... and online activities can take their place amongst the diversity of approaches that may be found within an English curriculum (Colbert et al, 2007 p.78).

6.1 Lecture- seminar- tutorial- workshop

These activities remain the most common means of delivering first-year curricula in English and do not require further elucidation here. The manner in which they are deployed, however, does vary and seems to depend upon a number of often practical influences, for example:

- large numbers of students on a module will often necessitate a large lecture followed by break-out seminar groups. This is an efficient use of resources, but there are potential pitfalls. As the lectures are often delivered by a number of academics with a specific expertise in either a period or a theoretical approach, this can lead to a fragmented course in which lectures do not always build upon each other explicitly. Additionally, the seminar tutor will not always have attended the lecture so there is a potential for conflict between the two classes. While academics will feel that such intellectual conflict is in itself part of developing students' minds, many students find it very unsettling. The provision of clear briefing papers to establish a commonality of practice amongst the module team is widely seen as an essential part of the module delivery.
- tutorials are less common, as they are labour intensive. In one institution this is part of the duties of the personal tutor where students are aided with redrafting essays in tutorials. This encourages a good relationship with the personal tutor as it gives the progress meetings a clear academic outcome and purpose as well as a pastoral one. Interestingly, Maria Misra in her regular column in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* has noted how "the crowning glory of the Oxford system – the single or paired tutorial ... is in danger, owing to student expectations and demands, or morphing into intensive sessions of high-level exam-cramming" (Misra, 2007, p. 54).
- workshops are combined lecture-seminar sessions. They encourage greater student activity than lectures and provide the opportunity for small group discussions and plenary sessions that seminars do not. If well managed, they can be exciting learning environments that encourage wide participation through small groups. However, they can also be a practical response to rising staff-student populations and/or a congested timetable. As one respondent put it, "We don't believe in lecture-only courses and we've gone to a lot of trouble to make sure that happened. We had to get organised with central block timetabling." In some circumstances, workshops can offer a solution to this problem.

6.2 Student contributions

Ensuring students are active rather than passive in class is widely held to be a key aspect of their transition to undergraduate study. The shift from absorbing material that has been presented to students as the answer to a more discursive pattern of teaching in workshops and seminars where experimentation and risk-taking were possible was a prominent concern during my research. If the first-year curriculum is considered to be preparatory, then it should carry an element of preparing students for this active approach, particularly if one wishes to avoid the often reported issue of 'the same voices contributing in each class.'

In some cases this begins with induction activities that set the tone for the rest of the year by making it evident from the outset that students should expect to contribute to the class. In other programmes, verbal contribution becomes part either of the teaching and learning activities through short presentations or introductions, or by making group discussion a non-assessed precursor to in-class tests (see Example of Practice). In a scaffolded approach, some also use workshop activities in which students make presentations as a precursor to small group work, rather than the more daunting presentation to the whole class.

Example of Practice 4

In *Critical Theory 1* at Derby University, students are required to write a 750 word essay in class explaining and applying the theory under consideration. In the hour before they commence writing, they work through their ideas in small discussion groups. The notion here is that students' work will benefit from the opportunity to share their thoughts on some challenging theoretical material. In addition, it fosters an expectation of shared input into class discussions in a manner intended to spread throughout the programme and (hopefully) encourages social networks beyond the teaching environment.

A further variation on this is the assessed discussion activity on a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (see Example of Practice 5). Briefly, it:

- obliges full participation by each class member whilst removing potential anxieties about making oneself heard in a group of more dominant individuals;
- allows individuals time for reflection before contributing;
- leaves a permanent record of the discussion both for assessment purposes and for future reference, both by staff and students.

Example of Practice 5

The English team at Wolverhampton University makes extensive use of on-line forums as a mode of assessment (see Colbert et al, 2007). In *Introduction to Literature 1*, students must post their responses to regular on-line tasks onto a Group Discussion Folder for the module on the VLE. They must also post a response to at least one other posting in order to complete the task.

In truth, some of these strengths are also weaknesses. The Wolverhampton team hopes to encourage agility of mind, confidence and ability to work with others in real-life situations, so this is not a replacement for normal seminar discussions. As the module designers have pointed out, "online teaching and [learning] activities only have value if they allow students to develop key skills, abilities and interests that we regard as at the heart of university English, ... the use of a VLE must extend the possibilities for this *in ways that go beyond what is achievable* within a more traditional classroom setting" (Colbert et al 2007, p. 76. my emphasis).

This might generally be seen as an argument against overuse of distance learning. The important message that came from all respondents was that students should become accustomed to being active in class.

6.3 Presentations

The use of student presentations as part of the more general development of spoken communication skills is seen by many respondents as being a key activity for English departments. There is a range of perceived beneficial outcomes from presentations insofar as they can:

- build confidence in contributing to much of what we do in the teaching environment, i.e. the verbal exchange of ideas and opinions;
- be a guard against plagiarism, since students would need to put ideas into their own words (unless learned by rote or read directly from a prepared script – both of which should be deterred as poor practice);
- be a guard against student passivity in class, either by obliging students who do not regularly contribute to discussions to do so, or by offering the opportunity for the most nervous to voluntarily participate;
- foster good peer and social relationships as well as the key skill of working with others;
- provide opportunities to employ audio-visual and IT aids in a manner that also develops key skills;
- take the emphasis away from tutor-led learning and place a value on peer learning with opportunities for peer assessment through question and answer sessions;
- combine subject based knowledge with a set of skills very likely to be employed by English graduates who most often go into careers where the accurate and interesting transmission of information is an essential part of the job.

There are difficulties with this, however. Many respondents agreed with the benefits outlined above, but noted that:

- time and space often prohibited presentations as class sizes grew and felt it might encroach too much on formal teaching hours;
- presentations generated inordinate student anxiety and attempts to ameliorate this by using non-assessed presentation often meant students did not turn up, thus causing resentment and the opposite of the positive outcomes noted above.

If presentations are used, it is vital that students be prepared for the experience in detail.

6.4 Mixed ability cohorts

Some respondents refer to the first year as being a diagnostic one: that is to say, part of its function is to identify students' strengths and weaknesses and enable them to work on these in preparation for the final two years. This has potentially more significance for those courses that recruit students with very mixed levels of prior attainment who consequently have a wider spectrum of competencies upon entry.

In those institutions where there is a premium placed upon retention, there is arguably a greater requirement to bring students with quite severe academic weaknesses up to undergraduate standard by the end of the first year. This is the difference noted above between planning opportunities

to introduce new skills within a first-year curriculum and having to attend to basic issues of written literacy. However, this might also be put into the context that has been evident throughout: A Level work is not necessarily ideal preparation for undergraduate study, and concerns relating to students' basic skills upon entry are not restricted to programmes with lower entry requirements. In either instance, this places a greater emphasis upon scaffolded approaches to teaching and learning. The real challenge in such scenarios is to design a programme of study that is both challenging for the more able students and achievable for those who are less able. In most cases, respondents noted a 'long tail' of students with lower grades than one would normally expect in institutions with higher entry requirements and a process of selection during admissions.

7.0 Assessment

Assessment modes should be designed to develop as well as to measure the accurate, clear, effective and sustained communication of ideas and subject knowledge (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 4.2).

It is desirable for students of English to experience a variety of assessment forms (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 4.7).

7.1 The essay

The essay remains the most common means of assessing students, although there is considerable variation on this now, as described below. What the expansion of assessment tasks has brought to attention is a clearer sense of what essays actually assess; what skills they require to produce good results. Most respondents did feel that students were over-coached at A Level and this had resulted in an exaggeratedly formalistic approach to their construction. One respondent's view was that, "in the A Level specification, it's more about knowledge than skills. I find they have a very instrumental, mechanical style. Two-thirds of their essay is about what their essay is about." This seems to chime with Bleiman and Webster's assertion that, at A Level, "weaker answers often doggedly quoted unassimilated statements by critics, evidently feeling that it does not matter what is said so long as a critic says it" (2006, p. 15). In short, students learn that quoted sources earn additional marks and incorporate them precisely on that functionalist basis.

It would be difficult to argue that this was not also a characteristic of poor undergraduate work and it seems clear that one aspect of the first year should be to continue to work on students' skills in what remains a core activity of assessment. Respondents agreed: "What we're aiming for is more diversity whilst also giving them lots of practice at the essay so they become really good at it [i.e. essay writing] by the end of the first year."

This notion of diversity was also generally supported by respondents, who took the view that such variations placed an emphasis on refining essay writing techniques, rather than simply allowing students to employ the same (safe) methodology repeatedly: "there's a little bit of overemphasis on the standard essay – we're trying to introduce more variation."

7.2 Examinations

There was no clear agreement from respondents on whether students from A Level arrived better equipped for examination performance over essays and this response probably says much about the change to the A Level syllabuses. Neither was there any broad consensus on what examinations could achieve. One respondent noted, "exams can be weak on assessing skills – I would be very unhappy with an exams only regime". Another agreed, but added that he "wouldn't consider getting rid of exams altogether. It is a skill: what do you have in your head and what can you do with it?" In short, examinations can be very good at assessing at least two skills: working to time limits and writing cogently in terms both of expression and structure – without the opportunities for drafting and redrafting that coursework essays present (see 7.5 below). Examinations also have the advantages of acting as a counter against plagiarism and of placing an emphasis on students' need to revise across the syllabus, as against being very targeted in their preparation. As one respondent put it (in a statement with much wider application), "first-year students get quite canny about minimum effort." One reason for varying assessments in the first year, therefore, is to try to prevent such strategies leaking into the latter stages of the degree.

Example of Practice 6

At Derby University, seen examinations are used extensively throughout the programme. The questions are distributed to students typically two or three weeks before the examination to curtail a possible tendency for students to direct their efforts towards exam preparation throughout the module and thus put a false limit on the breadth of their engagement. Where unseen elements are employed, they are typically in a multiple choice format, where students select a set number of terms or concepts from a list and apply them to an image or extracted text.

One variation employed by respondents was the use of seen, rather than unseen examination (see Example of Practice 6). The advantages of this were considered to be that they:

- produced typically better-focused answers, as they had been prepared;
- reduced some, but not all, of the anxiety surrounding examinations and, thus, were not a 'test of nerves';
- retained the function of examinations in deterring plagiarism;
- clearly rewarded endeavour and ability, where unseen exams can sometimes introduce an element of chance – your best prepared question 'coming up';
- did not oblige students to revise across the syllabus. This was felt to be a more transparent and honest process than 'dropping hints' during revision sessions.

7.3 Other common assessment tasks

7.3.1 In-class assessment

In-class assessments were seen to be beneficial because they:

- were typically shorter pieces that reduced grading time and therefore provided opportunities for early feedback;
- were an incentive for regular attendance, if the tests were themselves a continuous part of the module;

- tested the same skills of working to time limits and under pressure as examinations, but without the formal administration;
- were still a proof against plagiarism.

7.3.2 Short essays

Short essays were felt to encourage precision in writing and place a more explicit value on using supporting quotations, both secondary and primary, wisely. As a consequence, students should be able to concentrate upon the skill of writing to good effect and to avoid the dangers of padding out longer essays by narrativising the construction of the essay itself.

7.3.3 Creative work (see Example of Practice 7)

The use of creative writing as a means of studying literary technique was not particularly widespread as a practice and often depended upon the presence of an academic who felt comfortable with teaching and assessing creative work. Where it was carried out, it was felt to have real advantages in helping students come to grips with the formal qualities of both poetry and prose. Bleiman and Webster point out that, at A Level, "Some teachers do offer creative writing as part of their classroom work, as ways of teaching the text. However, the EMC [English and Media Centre] survey suggests that is this relatively rare" (Bleiman and Webster, 2006, p. 21).

Where this technique was being used, respondents felt it was successful both in promoting 'serious fun' and in helping students become more aware of literary form and genre. Frequently, though, it was seen to be something that was not a core activity. Instead, it was often "optional modules [that] have a creative/reflective option," so this still seems to be a rather marginalised activity.

7.3.4 Annotated bibliography/reviews/journals

Annotated bibliographies are becoming increasingly common. Their advantages were seen to be that they:

- place an explicit focus upon the importance of employing secondary sources, and can be undertaken as an activity in their own right;
- foster high standards of academic presentation to be transferred to other assessments;

- enable students to avoid charges of plagiarism since it schools them from the first year in the importance and techniques of referencing systems.

7.3.5 Reviews

Reviews provide the opportunity to write comparatively short pieces and also to adopt different forms of register, thus increasing knowledge of different language uses and conventions. In addition, they offer students the opportunity to distinguish between opinions based upon individual preference and the more academically-sourced arguments of essays. As one respondent said, talking about the (still popular) notion that students cannot be wrong in what they think a literary text means, as long as they have an argument for it, "I usually try to shoot that down pretty quickly. You are obliged at this level to look at content as well as context and to consider what other people think about it."

7.3.6 Journals

Learning journals can be an alternative or complement to Personal Development Plans. They encourage self-reflection, are built up continuously (thus avoiding pinch-points in setting assignment dates) and help students take a holistic view of the module, rather than a more selective concentration upon specific topics or text that exams and essays can encourage.

7.4 Over-assessment

Two opportunities to assess [per module] is very fair.

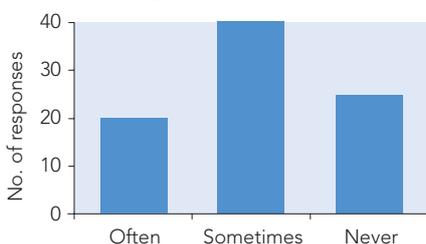
One concern that was frequently voiced was that of over-assessment. The importance of formative feedback notwithstanding, many respondents felt that too much assessment obstructed an emphasis upon *how* students learn, through a focus upon *what* they learn. What commonly lay behind these concerns was the sense that students were already too driven by developing successful assessment strategies at the expense of intellectual development, often characterised as creativity or risk-taking. In all instances, the (institutional) rationale for ensuring that the first-year grades had no impact upon the final degree classification was to encourage precisely this form of intellectual freedom. Extending this logic to the programme level should allow for a reduction in assessment

Example of Practice 7

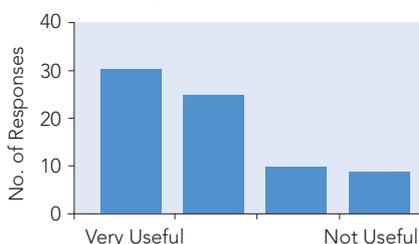
Sheffield Hallam uses *Verse and Narrative*, a creative writing module, as a means of teaching students to write – and therefore recognise – different poetic forms such as sonnets, blank verse etc. In *Introduction to Literature 1* at Wolverhampton University, students are asked to write new dialogue inhabiting the personality traits of characters from the set texts (this is also applied elsewhere in the programme, see Miles, 2007). Both Sheffield Hallam and Wolverhampton acknowledged an initial resistance from some students to work outside of their skill sets in exposition, but noted genuine perceived benefits from both students and staff once this initial wariness was passed.

The Wolverhampton University questionnaire given to students at induction also shows high levels of perceived usefulness of creative writing in students' anticipation of university study, despite relatively low experience of this prior to university.

Creative Writing – experience at school



Creative Writing – perceived usefulness for higher education study



that would, ideally, promote intellectual experimentation and potentially free up time for reflection upon both the knowledges and skills worked through in class.

While over-assessment was a recurrent issue raised by respondents in my research, there were very few instances where assessment regimes had been cut as a consequence of programme planning or design through validation. There were, however, two possible alternatives to formal assessment, the discussions surrounding which were indicative of the difficulties in this regard.

7.5 Drafting

[Students can] draft and resubmit, resubmit at A Level and here they can't.

I had a couple of students saying, 'Can I do it again?'

We would never look at an entire essay and hand it back prior to formal submission, but we can look at the first page or two.

There were a number of difficulties that emerged in the discussion of offering students the opportunity to submit first drafts, get feedback and then resubmit a revised version:

- it was felt to smack of A Level practice and therefore contributed to a sense of concentrating upon working very narrowly to get a defined topic 'correct', when the key transitional act of higher education is to get students to read more widely and more quickly;
- it might threaten the desired growth of student autonomy if it sustains a sense of student dependency upon tutors as collaborative writers;
- it was felt that the increasing availability of detailed assessment guidelines and other forms of guides to good practice should be sufficient to support students in this regard and drafting would encourage them to ignore such advice (even more). (See 8 below for a fuller discussion on assessment guidelines);
- the unweighted first year was itself structured upon notions of cognitive or intellectual redrafting through formative feedback;
- students tend not to produce drafts unless there is a grade attached to the activity;
- hard-pressed academics simply did not have enough time to look at drafts and comment upon them as a matter of routine.

These points all have merit and will be recognisable to most colleagues. However, it was also true that all respondents felt that students should get quickly into the habit of editing and redrafting their assignments before submission, so there was a certain conflict in the way the topic was discussed. One way of trying to reframe the debate was to consider the practices currently in place with regard to resit assignments. Are students asked to do the same question again, based upon the feedback received, or a different question, assuming they will apply the feedback meaningfully to a different task? In either case, respondents felt that the feedback was itself vital to enabling students to improve upon their performance. If this logic applied more widely than the pass/fail threshold and extended across the full range of performance, it would seem reasonable to make

it available before the point of submission. One part of this relates to increasingly common demands that students should be able to get feedback on their examination performances, so they will know what they did well or badly and be able to transfer that knowledge to future assessments.

The concern regarding the time pressures that this would place upon staff is, however, a very real one, not least in the first year where very large populations of students sit on the core modules. The provision of detailed guidelines is, in this respect, a more efficient way of communicating what are very often quite common flaws in students' work. However, if the first year is about transition, redrafting would seem to be a helpful way of explicitly enabling students to understand what different responses characterise undergraduate work from those for A Level. Furthermore, this is something that seems to be usefully incorporated into creative writing workshops through peer assessment and there would seem to be a good argument for adopting this more widely to aid transition. Students can also be encouraged to review drafts of each other's work. This is a process which can be greatly helped by the use of technology, specifically blogs, wikis and discussion boards.

In one instance encountered during my research (see 6.1), first-year students are required to talk through drafts of their work with their personal tutor. This builds effectively upon practices in A Level, whilst offering the individual support that avoids simply following fixed formats. It can also function well as a point at which students can, of necessity, be directed to additional support of mentoring services. This practice also gives meetings with personal tutors (that institutions frequently regard as being an important aid to student retention) a clear value to students and thus helps to establish that relationship as having both an academic and a pastoral meaning. Without the former, as noted in 1.3 above, the latter is not enough to persuade students to engage.

7.6 Non-assessed tasks

I think there would be some students who were really hacked off about that – writing an essay and getting no credit for it.

The problem would be with people who didn't do the work – the problem would be bigger if the essays weren't assessed.

Reducing assessments by definition places a greater emphasis upon non-assessed activities and one can never be sure how far students will carry their strategic engagement under these circumstances. In short, unless grades are involved, students are unlikely to take assignments seriously. Furthermore, by reducing points of assessment in the first year, one runs the risk of further instilling the view that the first year does not count.

That said, one can take the view, not unreasonably, that the majority of students take their studies seriously enough for us not to have to invent means by which compliance can be enforced (already I'm using the language of dictatorship). And it is also true that introducing penalties for poor engagement – like attendance – can be at odds with institutional pressure to improve retention and progression.

8.0 Assessment criteria and guidelines

It is important that at the outset, students are fully informed of the particular emphases and strengths of their programmes of study, and that assessment criteria be explicitly linked to programme outcomes (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 4.1).

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 (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 4.6).²

Assessment criteria should be specified in relation to the programme, unit or module as appropriate (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 4.6).

This kind of assessment of the AOs [assessment objectives at A Level] has led to teaching and learning that is focused less on individual interest, exploratory approaches and risk-taking, and more on meeting precise examination requirements. Some teachers and students feel that this has produced a more mechanistic approach to texts and less independence of thought (Bleiman and Webster, 2006, p.14).

These concerns (about students' uncertainty of how to deliver good UG essays) are not easily dispensed with by the guidelines, or even by tutorials as might be hoped, because not all tutors or departments have the same expectations (Davies, 2006, p. 31).

8.1 Assessment guidelines or spoon-feeding?

As well as providing learning outcomes by programme and module, it is widespread practice to provide additional advice with regard to specific assignments that indicate to students the kinds of scholarly activities for which they will be rewarded. Seemingly innocent enough, assessment guidelines continue to stimulate a debate about the amount of guidance one should give students in responding to an assessment task, debate that goes back, I believe, to the issue of distinguishing higher education from A Level study.

As this report demonstrates, common perceptions are that A Level study is over-directed and produces students who are both target-driven and lack creativity. By comparison, higher education is intended to produce students who are independent learners and who are able to synthesize materials in an original manner. An anecdote demonstrates this tension of transition. One respondent related a tale of a first year student who, having been briefed on the essay title, asked, "Aren't you going to give us the first paragraph?" S/he then explained to the perplexed tutor that s/he was accustomed to being given this at A Level (either that or s/he was simply trying it on!). As a pedagogic approach, I thought it had possibilities in helping students think more clearly about what a good opening paragraph should contain, but, on its own, it simply added to the notion of A Level students being 'spoon-fed'.

8.2 Assessment guidelines and transition

The overall experience of my research showed that academics felt that students were both arriving both with fewer skills than previously and with a greater expectation of advice and

guidance from teaching staff on how to do well. This is not to be dismissed, although, as Pieterick points out, "it's important to note that literacy crises are continual ... often these instances coincide with widened access to education for previously excluded groups" (Pieterick, 2007). Whilst all the academics interviewed were keen to preserve what they felt were the particular qualities of degree level attainments, there was general acceptance that, as indicated in the Subject Benchmarks, providing guidance to students on how best to achieve this was not to the detriment of the sector as a whole.

For me, this guidance seems most pressing in first year curricula. Students arrive having been trained in performing for A Level study and must quickly adapt to the new demands of undergraduate study. The notion of the non-weighted first year operating as a conversion or foundation year does carry with it (as noted above in 7.5) a 'learning by doing' logic that places great emphasis upon students responding to formative feedback or to grades as an indicator for improving performance. Assessment guidelines offer a way of anticipating this process by providing in advance the guidance that often comes through comments on essays.

8.3 How much guidance is appropriate?

The difficulty can be in knowing what guidelines students need. Providing the first paragraph as a matter of routine might seem to be excessive, yet many respondents agreed that regular feedback on essays included statements such as, 'you must respond to the question fully'; 'your answer should include reference to researched sources'; or 'failure to acknowledge your sources is plagiarism and an academic offence'. As maddening as this might be for the marking tutor, it does clearly suggest that what we might consider to be obvious does still need to be explained to students making the transition to undergraduate study.

One increasingly common practice is the provision of model answers to guide students, something previously more associated with disciplines that employ, for example, laboratory experiment reports, where a fixed format is central to the discipline. Such regimentation would seem to be counter-intuitive in a subject where sophisticated writing skills and rhetorical prowess are indices of the highest quality work. Model answers in this regard can confuse as much as inform, since we do not seek to encourage students to follow fixed formats in their answers. As a consequence, model answers might have to come with accompanying notes to explain what aspects of the answer were particularly praiseworthy, and alert students to distinguish between the transferable skill of the composition and the value of the content. As one respondent put it to me, "You can't do everything. We point them in the direction of what I regard as very good sources [on essay writing] but you've got to strike a balance." (See Example of Practice 8)

Example of Practice 8

I produced my own model answer for Level 2 *Critical Theory 2* at Derby University to aid students in a difficult task requiring the understanding and application of theoretical essays in a concise, 500 word answer in timed conditions. Whilst doing this, it became clear that the module answer would itself need a meta-narrative explaining the virtues and vices of my own work. Looking back at this in class for the first time, I started to realise that my explanation also needed explaining and the prospect of a form of infinite regression floated in front of me.

Essay planning rather than model answers might present a useful alternative and, again, this was a widely used technique in the programmes I encountered. However, one respondent noted that even this can be problematic: "There can be a difficulty in working on plans – it became a set of tick boxes where students would put in their chunks in *Pamela* and *Robinson Crusoe*, but with no real connection between them." In this respect, assessment guidelines, though potentially very useful, still represent something of an area of conflict for issues of transition.

8.4 Student guides

All respondents noted a proliferation of student guides and other sources of general and module specific information in the last ten years. In many cases, the introduction of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) had intensified and accelerated this growth. They represent a repository of information constantly available to students and consequently should be an important reference point for them. Information here ranged from the very module-specific, typically including module guides and assessment briefs, weekly reading schedules etcetera. These VLEs would also include web-links to recommended essay writing pages and other academic support guides as well as institutional level information such as regulations on students' rights and responsibilities.

What was less, clear, however, was whether there has been a simultaneous expansion in the meaningful use of such facilities. Part of this lack of progress is uncertainty about whether information on VLEs (or in hard copy) is an efficient means of mass communication or an efficient way of posting information that is not necessarily communicated.

9.0 The development of knowledge and skills

[English graduates should be able to demonstrate] an ability to articulate knowledge and understanding of texts, concepts and theories relating to English studies (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 3.2).

Whereas, historically, universities were more free to educate for the sake of knowledge and understanding, now they are being explicitly asked to provide a work force. (Davies, 2006 p. 35).

Students are arriving at university without the basic skills which make coherent written work possible. (Davies, 2006 xi).

Some colleagues resist the skills agenda.

9.1 Can they be separated?

Most people I consulted were reluctant to separate these two categories. As one respondent put it, "being able to distinguish between Modernism and Modernity is both an act of knowledge and a skill." Similar views can be related to the modules that are common in first year curricula. The historical survey modules combine knowledge of key figures, genre and texts with the skill of synthesising contextual and textual study. Equally, the theory-based modules might provide a range of skills in different ways to approach literary texts, but they also are themselves based upon the knowledge and understanding of those theories. The

question to be asked, then, is what is to be achieved by working with this conceptual split?

With regard to first-year curricula, I think the question poses some unresolved difficulties for the subject area. There seems to be fairly common agreement with regard to knowledge, insofar as the survey modules typically start with the Renaissance and work up to the present day. They also tend to deal with English, rather than global literature. So, for first-year curricula, there is apparent agreement on what constitutes core knowledge with regard to scope.

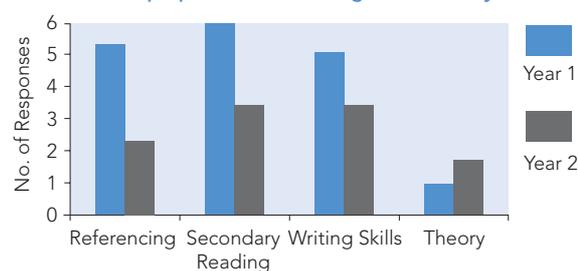
I also found fairly consistent responses to the question: 'What do you consider to be the greatest challenge of first year curricula?' The answer was usually some variation on 'Getting students to read and/or think about literature differently', with responses such as these being representative of students' skills deficit on entry:

They don't come with the habits or skills of sustained reading.

They lack the flexibility to transfer ideas and perspectives from one novel to another: they have a narrow view of what can be applied to what, once they have been taught it.

Example of Practice 9

Derby Questionnaire – skills useful as preparation for undergraduate study



In an open question students at Derby were asked to name any one thing they had learnt to do (i.e. a skill rather than knowledge) during the first year that prepared them well for later undergraduate study. They were then asked to do the same for Year 2. The aim here was to identify what students felt had been most important to their progression from being A Level students to approaching final year students.

The Year 1 bars in blue show the requirement for secondary reading as being most significant, with referencing and writing skills roughly equal and theory less important. Other skills noted included working in groups and using the university VLE.

The Year 2 bars in grey show a similar distribution with fewer responses, although the application of theory has a proportionately higher rating. This may relate to other responses that show a higher appreciation of the theories taught in the Year 2 core module.

If thinking about reading as a skill, as well as a means of acquiring knowledge, is a key challenge for first-year curricula, I found surprisingly little explicit attention given to it. In my own survey (see Example of Practice 9) of students asking, 'Name any one thing you were taught during your first year of English that you feel has prepared you well for undergraduate study', only six responses identified secondary reading with an equal

number of students identifying referencing systems and writing skills. This does not necessarily mean that those students did not learn new reading skills, but it may indicate that they have done so without being made aware of it. It may also indicate that what they did recognise and implicitly applaud in themselves was the acquisition of a set of rules, with regard to academic presentation, where being right or wrong was both clearly articulated and recognisable. This in itself might be a strong argument in favour of articulating skills in assessment guidelines to provide students with appropriate parameters.

9.2 The development of skills

A problem for first years is how to concentrate on skills: 'I don't know how to write an essay', 'I don't know how to use the library.' 'I don't know how to read a poem'. They don't always want to learn it.

There is a steep learning curve: from the 1st to the 2nd year there's an enormous jump.

In recent years there's been more emphasis on skills – we're upping that.

The development of subject specific skills remains one of the unresolved areas of programme design in English. I found little common practice among the institutions visited, with strategies ranging from explicit modules offered as an elective within first year programmes, to programmes that embed skills and provide supplementary study support schemes organised centrally by the institution.

What emerged from this lack of common practice was not a lack of urgency with regard to developing skills, as much as an uncertainty about how to go about doing it. Key issues here were:

- who should teach it?
- where should be taught?
- what should it include?
- at what level should it be pitched?

9.3 Who teaches skills?

Most academics will readily admit that they have not been trained to write, much less teach writing skills (Davies, 2006, p.33).

In the best of these programmes, such as that at Cornell, lecturers are trained in writing assignment design and constructive response to student writing. (Pieterick, 2007).

Typically, lecturing staff do not view themselves as being teachers of basic skills, but rather skilled practitioners at interpretation, analysis and exposition. So there is a twin impediment here: a skills-based agenda is seen both as a distraction or a dilution of a programme dedicated to a knowledge-based curriculum and also a potential waste of staff expertise. In many ways, then, the skills agenda is often analogous to the development of e-learning: its presence within any programme is usually the consequence of a 'tech-head' within the teaching team. Without this, it is often outsourced to central services.

9.4 Embedded or centralised?

Writing is a more or less generic skill best taught in a course focused on a particular topic or set of ideas by an instructor who is both deeply engaged in the topic and interested in coaching writing. (Pieterick, 2007).

It is worth emphasising that specialist writing requires a grasp of subject-specific elements such as theoretical frameworks, major debates and the acquisition of terminology. (Davies, 2006, p.30).

I think it's very difficult to teach it [writing skills] as a discrete thing.

While respondents were clear that students did need to improve, develop or acquire the skills felt essential to undergraduate study, there was no clear consensus on whether such skills should be taught within the programme or be located in referral systems outside the department. Up to a point, this could still be related to a sense of nervousness amongst some academics that such teaching was not really their field of specialism and should therefore be carried out by appropriately qualified and trained colleagues.

However, where this did occur and formed part of the curriculum, students reportedly felt it lacked direct relevance to their studies and that they were already skilled as a consequence of their A Level study. Where such sessions exist as a supplement to the taught programme, they were often felt to be remedial and thus students were either reluctant to take them up due to embarrassment (particularly in the first year when anxieties run high) or did not consider them to be necessary for them. Additionally, such sessions that are taught outside the department were often felt to lack subject specificity, further exacerbating a sense of irrelevance for students – and staff.

9.5 What skills should be taught?

[English graduates should possess] advanced literacy and communication skills and the ability to apply these in appropriate contexts, including the ability to present sustained and persuasive written and oral arguments cogently and coherently (QAA 2007 English Subject Benchmark 3.3).

First year [students] build authority not by writing from a position of expertise but by writing into expertise. (Pieterick, 2007).

It's getting worse as well – students are very varied – they become very dependent upon direction and working very strategically, not geared to reading in depth or widely on their own – even reading a long novel comes unnaturally to them.

Writing skills are important to a text-based discipline and, frequently, there is a sense that these are developed through formative assessment, as essay-writing (in the variety of forms noted above) is developed as a skill through practice informed and improved by regular feedback and advice. This is what is meant by implicit skills development – essay writing is not taken as an activity to be taught and improved on its own basis, but rather as a by-product of the study of literary texts or English language.

Writing and academic writing skills aside, the other main issue cited by respondents was reading skills. As noted above in Section 4, the major transition from A Level to UG study for students is a quite sudden requirement to read a greater number of texts in a shorter space of time and with less in-class time given to studying the texts in great detail. Instead, there is a higher value placed upon students' ability to generate their own interpretations of texts and to become creative thinkers. Close reading skills were something that most respondents felt they could rely on in new undergraduates, but reading quickly and effectively across a range of texts was a new skill to learn. However, in none of the institutions encountered either in this research or elsewhere have I found an example of how this crucial skill is taught except through the implicit 'learning through doing' that seems to characterise much skills-based practice in this field. Typically, where this is taught, it is by example – lectures and seminar activities are based upon the analysis of specific passages or events from the texts under discussion and these, whether intentionally or not, are expected to provide models for students' own practice.

This is one instance where telling students what is happening would be beneficial. Alternatively, lecturers could be more explicit about their own methodologies in teaching, and could shift the emphasis from what (should students learn from this) to how and why (this is effective).

9.6 Expected competencies and skills pitching

The need for writing support varied from cohort to cohort.

We've been quite struck by the standard of some students – they really don't know how to construct an argument.

The other main difficulty with teaching skills is in determining the level(s) of ability at which to pitch support. Bibliographic coaching is comparatively straightforward, as it is offered on a ground of assumed novelty to all new undergraduates. However, if writing is taken to be a skill (as opposed to knowledge) does one assume competence in forming sentences and paragraphs (thereby leaving such apparently elementary abilities to be the province of remedial support services) and concentrate instead on more advanced skills such as the meaningful use of supporting quotations, the construction of argument and the deployment of subject-specific terminology?

9.7 Other skills

In addition to skills based upon reading and writing there is a raft of additional practices that respondents felt would characterise a good graduate in English and that should therefore be fostered from the first year.

9.7.1 Scholarly conventions

Other skills-based practices that seem more routinely taught are academic presentation techniques. Annotated bibliographies (see 7.3.4) are common in first year modules, usually in tandem with the provision of style guides or other in-house documents providing guidance.

9.7.2 Oral skills

These are an essential component of contributing to seminar and tutorial discussions and to the group work that is a core activity in university English. However, like writing, this is very much a 'learning by doing' activity and, with class sizes growing,

it is increasingly possible for students to get through whole degree programmes, let alone the first year, without contributing to discussions. Interestingly, where training for presentations does take place, it is typically in the use of ICT in the form of Powerpoint presentations. (For more on presentations see 6.3 above.) Ironically, ICT skills are often well-advanced among new undergraduate students and this concentration upon such resources probably says more about new learning among academic staff than students themselves (there are numerous anecdotal reports of academics introducing weblogs, podcasts or texting into their teaching and being praised for innovative teaching practices, having learnt how to use such media from their children!)

9.7.3 Aural skills

Being taught in large lectures is not common in A Level study, but is a principal teaching and learning method in higher education:

The requirement to use material presented in the lecture forum and in large seminar groups as a basis for independent thinking and study and in a frequently less structured way is a new demand for the majority of students entering Higher Education. (Green, 2005, p.80).

What should students be doing in lecture theatres? Trying to write everything down? Being 'active listeners'? Only noting those ideas or facts that they consider to be particularly significant? Unfortunately, lecturing staff also seem to be unsure of the function of lectures. Their role as a forum for researched academics to deliver thought-provoking ideas seems to have been replaced by the lecture as a medium for delivering essential facts upon which students can base their own arguments (I realise this is a somewhat simplistic distinction). This latter capacity may be a consequence of increasing staff-student ratios and of falling contact hours. For the same reasons, lectures are now often supplemented by notes on the university VLE that further complicate the expected activity of students in lectures (or simplify it, as students simply either do not attend lectures but rely upon the VLE notes instead). Indeed, such guidelines as do exist and currently proliferate on students' activities in classes have to do with establishing protocols of minimum acceptable behaviour ('talking and texting') rather than promoting best scholarly practice amongst students.

9.7.4 E-learning

The integration of e-learning into English studies can no longer be regarded as innovative per se, although we can recognise varying levels of integration into different programmes. These seem to range from the requirement to word process essays and the availability of course and module documents on the VLE (at the most basic) to the use of on-line forums, the production of blogs or the employment of web resources in teaching, learning and assessment activities at the other.

This is not the place for the debate about the usefulness of such activities over and above the traditional paper-based work of the past. However, it does raise issues of training analogous to those of presentations or indeed an emphasis upon writing as a skill (rather than a medium for communicating knowledge). In each of these cases, the medium is crucial to the overall impact of the work: the effectiveness of an essay is enhanced by its composition in exactly the same way as a presentation can be

enhanced by good oral skills and the use of visual aids. Similarly, the production of web-logs or other on-line assignments will inevitably be improved by a facility in working with, and drawing together, materials from the web.

Again, not dissimilar to issues of writing support, academics will often feel unqualified to train students in using such resources. Guidance is therefore often limited to one-off sessions during induction to acquaint students with the VLE or to leaflets on how to access online databases.

9.8 Who needs it?

Interestingly, I got no sense that this need for coaching skills was more profound in institutions with lower entry requirements than those with very high ones. It is a widespread problem and one that still lacks consistency in the way different institutions respond to it, suggesting there is no simple solution. The influence of initiatives such as the RLF Writing Fellowships, the establishment of Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning and associated Fellows in various institutions across the country and growing attention to the Writing in the Disciplines (WiD) or Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) from programmes in the US is being widely felt. (See, for example, the 'Thinking Writing' programme at Queen Mary University of London www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk. My sense, though, is that the relationship between the development of skills and the teaching of the discipline at university level remains unresolved.

10. Conclusions

When asked what course they intend to pursue at university, students will commonly reply that they are going to 'do English'. Part of me rather admires the implied intention to wreak violence upon language and literature, as in 'I'll do you, English'. There are post-structuralist possibilities of achieving a bullying dominance over language and narrative, of making it responsive to one's own demands, rather than being the Object of meaning-making through language.

Regrettably, this is rarely what such incipient freshers mean. Instead, when I press new students to describe what it is they hope to learn to do in the course of their degree programme, they generally reply that they want to become an adept at uncovering the - and it usually is expressed in the singular - hidden meaning of the text. Our aspirations for our students, as academics, tend to be somewhat broader. Ben Knights circulated a list of suggested qualities in 2006 at the Council for College and University English AGM at St. Anne's College, Oxford, that strike me as being representative of the sector:

"I would like my students to be:

- sensitive to complexity;
- open to new ideas;
- able to move light-footedly between the specific and the general;
- verbally creative and playful;

- willing to tolerate ambiguity;
- wide and determined readers of a variety of kinds of text;
- confident in taking intellectual risks". (Knights, 2006)

In order to draw these two sets of aspirations together, first year curricula in English still need to respond to René Wellek's challenge to F.R. Leavis to be more explicit, systematic and specific about the assumptions behind his literary criticism¹. If first-year curricula are to successfully bridge the divide between A Level and second-year standards and practices, they need to be able to express these clearly to students as the basis for learning.

Inevitably, such explicit articulation will draw upon the lexicon of skills. What skills are required for a nuanced reading of a text? What skills are employed to express this reading in a cogent and compelling essay? How can you build upon ideas and materials circulated in the teaching environment to produce an original and independent argument? How can the views of others – whether the product of discussion or wider reading – be employed to advance or modulate one's own ideas? Engaging with questions such as this, or using them as a basis for curriculum design should not – as some fear – represent an incursion into time more usefully spent on teaching subject knowledge, but should be a basis for producing better students.

My conversations with respondents, while admittedly limited in number, have demonstrated to me that English departments (albeit in a very mixed picture) are responding to a perceived need for an emphasis on skills development in their programmes. Such responses may be expressed more as a lament for the apparent decrease in students' competences upon admission, than an enthusiastic response to the government's intended implementation of the Leitch Review: but there is no reason why such opposing reactions should remain mutually exclusive. The skills that I have been describing – and that are being developed in most of the programmes I encountered – have intellectual, social and economic value in equal measure. The response from the subject community to Leitch might well allow us to provide a response to Wellek that Leavis declined in the 1930s and bring a new urgency to a discipline apparently lacking direction in a 'post-theory' era.

1 A controversy between the US critic René Wellek and F.R. Leavis which began with an exchange of articles ('Literary Criticism and Philosophy') in the March and June 1937 issues of the periodical *Scrutiny*. It is often taken to prefigure the debate between literary criticism and 'theory', in that Wellek was challenging Leavis to spell out the theoretical presuppositions which underlay his critical judgements.

Appendix 1: Summary of first year provision as described in Appendices 2, 3 and 4

Derby University (eight 15 credit modules each year)	Wolverhampton University (eight 15 credit modules each year)	Sheffield Hallam University (six 20 credit modules each year)
Critical Theory 1 ('hard theory – core for both single honours and joint students')	Introduction to Literature 1 ('soft-theory'/skills)	Introduction to English Studies ('soft-theory'/skills)
C16th Literature (specialist student must take at least one of three period modules from across the whole provision)	Introduction to Literature 2 (historical survey – core for single honours students only)	Introduction to Drama and/or Introduction to Fiction (students must do at least one)
First Words (language competence/skills – core for single honours students only)	The Story of English or How English Works (language modules)	Describing Language (linguistics)
		Verse and Narrative (creative writing)
Poetry Post-1900	Introduction to Poetry	Introduction to Poetry
Drama Post 1900		
Fiction Post 1900		
Major Author Study		
European Encounters	Introduction to European Literary Movements and/or Introduction to European Literary Themes	
Black British Writing		
Visualising Gender		
Literature and Film	Storytelling and Adaptation (film studies)	
Reading American Literature	Images of America	
	Myth (classic mythologies in literature, film and society)	
	Being Bad (philosophy)	
Other electives from cognate areas or a modern language	Other electives from cognate areas or a modern language	Other electives from cognate areas or a modern language

Core modules
Elective modules

Appendix 2: Case Study – The University of Derby

Introduction

The University of Derby runs both a single honours degree in English and English as part of a combined honours programme, where it can be taken as a major, joint or minor route. It aims to recruit approximately 30 students to the single honours and the same FTE in the combined programme each year. It does not have a linguistics or language component to the programme, apart from a strand of writing-based skills modules for single honours students (see below). It has four full-time staff members and two 0.5 appointments.

The academic year is based on two 12 week semesters with no first year modules running through both. Students must pass eight modules (120 credits) to complete each year.

Curriculum design

The key principle behind the programme design was to offer a wide range of modules based upon genre, gender, period, world literatures, theory, interdisciplinary study and embedded study skills. This principle is combined with maximising student choice in electing modules for their programme.

The first year contains one module that is core for all students taking English whether as a single honours or combined degree, *Critical Theory 1*. Single honours students must also take the skills module, *First Words*, and at least one of the period modules on C16th, C17th and C18th literature at some point during their three year programme. Beyond that, they can choose freely from the remaining modules, none of which represent a pre-requisite for Years 2 and 3, so the principle of maximised choice continues through the programme. This gives students the choice to deepen knowledge in a particular area, acquire breadth of knowledge across several areas or do both.

Programme management

Personal tutors

The University runs a centralised scheme of academic counsellors for all students on the combined programme. These counsellors are the first point of contact for queries associated with students' selection of modules, internal transfer requests, requests for extensions due to extenuating circumstances (although this can also be achieved through module leaders) and notification of any personal difficulties.

On the single honours programme, each student is assigned a personal tutor during induction. These tutors act as a first point of contact for any of the above queries, beginning with a 'get to know you' session during induction itself. They also carry out progress meetings with their students five weeks into the first semester and after the first set of results are known from the first semester. These meetings are recorded and are intended to become the platform for personal development planning (PDP) in the future.

Induction

There is a raft of centralised university induction sessions including introductions to the university students' services, finance department, accommodation, learning centre, students' union etcetera. Combined honours students also have their first year programme signed and approved by course tutors during induction fairs.

Single honours students attend the same central talks and have their programmes approved by their personal tutors.

Writing support tutor

As part of a University-wide retention strategy, the English department has initiated a writing support scheme. This begins with an on-line skills test with sections on punctuation, appropriate use of quotes, and logical ordering. The results of this test are taken to the first progress meeting with the personal tutor in week 5 and, if any action is felt necessary, the student can be recommended to attend meetings with the writing support tutor. Students can also be referred to writing support as a result of tutors' responses to any assessed work. This is not intended to be a solely remedial mechanism, as students are also welcome to request tutorial support to improve their performance at the upper end of the marking scale.

Key Features

Choice

This programme offers a much wider choice than was typical of the curricula encountered during this study. Even with the restrictions placed upon single honours students, there remain any five modules to select from the remaining nine modules, and some of these modules run in more than one timetable slot in both semesters, with students largely in a position to elect which one they should attend.

All staff members teach on at least one of the first-year modules and it is common practice here for a single staff member to teach all twelve weeks of any module, rather than for the modules to be team taught. This includes *Critical Theory 1* which, due to its core status, attracts the highest number of students over the academic year. In this case, all timetabled slots are taught by the same lecturer for that slot throughout the semester. The teaching team is co-ordinated by detailed teaching schedules drawn up by the module leader to ensure parity of delivery.

The perceived benefits of offering choice are that it:

- gives the programme a distinctiveness in the sector;
- enables students to plan their timetable in a fashion that reflects the extra-curricular demands of modern study related to paid work, family commitments and the monetary and time costs associated with travel to, and from, the University;
- provides students with the potential to match the content and/or assessment methods from their existing competencies, thus aiding transition;
- encourages students from the outset to take responsibility for the development of their own intellectual interests from within the curriculum, thus instigating the independence of thought that is typically a characteristic of graduate skills;
- fosters good staff/student relations through the consistent presence of individual lecturing staff in individual modules.

Evaluation

Successive external examiners have commented favourably upon the range of modules available here. However, students, as explained in 5.5 above, are not always so driven by choice, preferring instead to be more directed in their studies and valuing apparent clarity of purpose over freedom to choose.

The department has encountered less difficulty with the issue of assumed knowledge that might be expected to be the case. It is true that a student can elect *C19th Poetry* in Year Two without having first taken *Poetry Post 1900* in Year One, but this has not generated any consistent lack of prosodic ability among the cohorts. As noted in 5.5 above, taking the first year module does not guarantee all students do well at it, and it is therefore not quite a guarantee in that regard.

Writing/Skills Development

There is a strong emphasis on developing students' writing skills as part of the first year. The use of a needs analysis test, followed by possible referral to a writing support tutor, begins this process during induction. The two core modules also embed writing support within the curriculum.

Critical Theory

Critical Theory 1 introduces students to theory from Leavis to Structuralism, via New Criticism, Russian Formalism and Reception Theory. It is assessed by five essays, 750 words in length, written in class at fortnightly intervals in the last 9 weeks of the semester. In these short essays, students must quote from, and apply theory to, a literary text (or extract) and write a reflective passage on the usefulness of that theory. In each case, they are dealing with extracts from original theorists, rather than secondary accounts of those theories. They are graded, and receive feedback on, their comprehension and application of the theory, the concision and accuracy of their expression and their accurate use of referencing and citations. They receive each essay back the week following their assessment so they can respond to the formative feedback and improve their performance throughout the semester.

Students taking this module in the first semester will receive regular feedback on their written work from week 4. Clear penalties are laid down for students who fail to respond to relatively easily addressed faults such as omitting page references for quotations or failing to underline book titles. A similar regime of continuous assessment and feedback is carried out at Level 2 in *Critical Theory 2* – also a core module for joint and single honours students.

First Words is more specifically focussed on students' language skills. It is assessed by coursework: a summary, annotated bibliography and a position paper. Together these assignments develop students' ability to write focussed, informed arguments presented in an appropriate academic format. While the assessment is not as regular as *Critical Theory 1*, the teaching activities typically employ peer-driven workshop activities that maintain a constant evaluation of the tasks undertaken for each class.

Both of these modules insist upon group discussion and input. In *Critical Theory 1*, the in-class tests are preceded by 60 minute group discussion of the task and *First Words* employs informal peer assessment, so the skills outcome of collaborative work is also built into the core options.

Evaluation

There are clear benefits from regular and early opportunities to assess students' writing skills and to feedback on them. This process encourages confidence in students who are often anxious about their abilities to succeed or uncertain of what different demands undergraduates will place upon them, whatever

their prior levels of attainment. Where students are in need of additional support they can be identified early and use the flexibility of the 'best four from five' system in *Critical Theory 1* to assure themselves that any initial adjustments will not be reflected in their final grade.

Regular assessment and return of work also enables staff and students to build a closer relationship than more traditional methods of assessment would permit. The group activities, tied to assessment, also facilitate the development of peer groups and encourage the habit of contributing to discussions early. The rigorous policing of academic presentation and bibliographic conventions develop good scholarly practice in students from the outset, giving them a sense of progression from A Level study.

The *First Words* module takes writing and scholarly activity as its topic where, for *Critical Theory 1*, it is something of a by-product – understanding theory is difficult enough! This is an improvement on the 'practice makes perfect' attitude of many curricula towards skills development. Furthermore, because it also has a focus upon activities typically taken to be specifically oriented towards the subject at undergraduate level – academic presentation, research methodologies, subject-specific terminology and IT skills - it is perceived to have a practical application to the subject area in a manner that non-embedded skills development modules often do not.

The difficulties here are largely those of resources. The writing support tutor had a fixed funding term that may not be long enough for its impact to be clearly apparent on both retention and progression within the subject (see Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006). Also, continuous assessment is very labour-intensive for the tutors involved. The module has developed a marking template to assist in this, but there is no easy way of getting past the number of essays this generates (although it does have its benefit in terms of spreading assessment beyond the two pressure points for more traditional assessment regimes in the middle and at the end of any semester). Similarly, workshop-style peer assessment requires capped class sizes that Band D funded students in English do not always support. The resources have to be found from within the department itself.

Appendix 3: Case Study – The University of Wolverhampton

Introduction

The University of Wolverhampton within the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences runs a single honours degree in Literature and Language, as well as English Language and Literature as separate combinations within a combined scheme. It aims to recruit 70 students to the specialist programme and 80 FTE to the combined programmes. It has eight full-time members of staff, although members of the team also contribute to teaching on modules in philosophy, American studies and creative writing. One staff member also has a 0.5 secondment to one of the University research institutes.

The academic year is based upon two 13 week semesters, with no through-year modules. Students must take and pass eight modules to progress to the second year.

Curriculum Design

The English modular provision requires all students to take *Introduction to Literature 1* and at least one module in English language. Single honours students must also take *Introduction to Literature 2* and *Introduction to Poetry*. This allows students a limited amount of flexibility in building their programme in the first year, although, as part of a university strategy, the first semester is, to a large extent, fixed.

The programme design also incorporates a school-wide scheme that provides a range of interdisciplinary, collaboratively taught modules on topics such as moral philosophy and mythological culture.

Choice widens in Years 2 and 3, as students choose at least two modules from lists A and B, which have been organised around principles of period and theme. Single honours students must take *Critical Theory/Textual Practice* as a core option.

Student Support

Personal Tutors

The School runs a centralised system of academic counsellors who have responsibility for advising students on all issues regarding module choice, programme transfer, applications for mitigating circumstances and the monitoring of student performance at assessment boards. There is also a school-wide system of personal tutors, allocated by subject. These tutors carry out a calendar of progress meetings designed to form part of an extended induction programme during the first year and also to assess and discuss performance following assessment boards. In this regard there is no distinction in the way single honours or joint students are supported as these are both school-wide activities under the remit of an associate dean.

Student opinion is formally canvassed through module evaluation questionnaires and through an open student forum held in the latter part of the second semester. Student representatives are also invited to a school-level forum that feeds back into annual monitoring at both programme and school levels.

Induction

Induction takes place through a University-wide 'Welcome Week'. This incorporates generic introductions to University-

wide services such as the learning centre, students' union and specific counselling sessions for module choice. Students are also initiated in the uses of the University VLE, Wolverhampton On-Line Framework (WOLF), and register and enrol electronically using this platform as a means of reinforcing this early engagement with the facility. The personal tutor system is used to confirm individual students' programme by week three and also to make informal enquiries concerning the students' initial experiences of university life.

Individual academic departments also hold subject specific introductory sessions. For the English department this includes introductions to all staff, initial advice on the differing expectations of university study and the support systems and advice available to student from within the English team. This would typically be followed by a team-building exercise such as a literary pub quiz or a treasure trail through the University buildings.

Key Features

e-learning and assessment

Introduction to Literature 1 is a soft-theory module. It introduces students to the widened reading strategies offered by a reconsideration of authors and authority, narratology, historical context and political readings. It does so with reference to texts from the three main genres: poetry, drama and the novel. In these regards it is typical of wider practice, particularly as *Introduction to Literature 2* is a historical survey module. Where it is innovative is in the 20% of the final grade currently given to students' participation in asynchronous on-line discussion forums.

These 'e-seminars' supplement, rather than replace, the more traditional lecture-seminar pattern of teaching and require students to engage in a range of critical, creative and archival tasks. For example, one task asks students to pick up a narrative thread and post their own sequel on the VLE, using the appropriate register and sense of character. Another requires students to look at electronic versions of illustrated texts on the William Blake Archive (www.blakearchive.org) and provide a critical response to the juxtaposition of poem and illustration. Other tasks require students to consult the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* and the database *Literature Online* in order to identify and comment upon etymology and intertextual references. In each case, students are required not simply to post their own contributions, but also to respond to at least one of their peers' postings. The final grade is based upon the best five tasks from a total of eight for each student.

Comment

The module designers have been careful to ensure that the on-line activities are not simply exercises that could just as effectively be carried out in more conventional forms. In this respect, students acquire both the subject-specific skills and knowledge afforded by the content of the module and also the more generic skills of using the internet as an authentic source of information for critical enquiry, rather than a source of cut and paste ideas of varying legitimacy. Also, the e-seminars combine scholarly tasks with the exchange of ideas more usually carried out in face-to-face groups. This is a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, such discussions. Doing it in a virtual environment does have the advantage, potentially, of being

more democratic in providing opportunities for contributions from all students. It also allows more time for consideration and reflection on the contributions of self and others and constitutes a (semi-)permanent record of the ideas that students can refer back to as the module progresses.

The module designers have pointed to “evidence of ‘added-value’ through frequent participation” and add, “most students have not only accepted the idea of an online component, but are equipped to exploit it” (Colbert et al, 2007, p. 82). So the value here is not just in providing innovation in module design and assessment, it is in establishing e-skills as a core part of the first-year curriculum that students can build upon throughout their degree. There are further examples of assessed on-line learning in the second and third year modules, with plans to expand this pedagogic practice.

In addition, the success of this module has established close links with the University’s Institute for Learning Enhancement and the English Subject Centre in projects that both extend and disseminate this practice. For example, one member of the department is currently an e-advocate for the Subject Centre. As an initiative, then, it has had a beneficial impact on both the student experience in the first year and on the development of the programme as a whole.

Skills Development

Introduction to Literature 1 also features embedded essay-writing workshops. In these, students are both introduced to, and assessed on, their accurate use of the department’s Style Guide on citation, referencing and the presentation of written work, as well as the construction of opening paragraphs and the use of essay-planning as a scholarly activity. The subject librarian will also provide a session on accessing, evaluating and using electronic databases in the Learning Centre. All of these practices are brought together in a final essay at the end of the module. Taken together, they represent a reasonably comprehensive and innovative introduction to new ways of both thinking and writing about literary texts.

In addition to this, students can also elect an optional module, *Writing for Academic Success*. This is not based within the English department, but students are encouraged to use written work for English modules (or whatever the individual student is enrolled for) as a basis for drafting, feedback and reflection. This module also covers generic skills such as reading and note-taking, basic rules of grammar, the construction of arguments and the use of academic conventions. It is not pitched at a level of remediation, but rather as an explicit aid to the transition to the expectations of university study and improving students’ performance at all levels.

Comment

There is a limit to the amount of material module designers can put into a thirteen week module, and so the basic skills embedded into the core module working in tandem with the e-skills component is an efficient model.

Writing for Academic Success is not embedded and is thus prone to students’ sense of it being remedial and/or occupying space in the timetable that might be better used studying literature. That said, it does try to draw together the subject-specific and the generic through the use of students’

current work. It is designed and delivered by a colleague with considerable expertise in developing writing skills, in addition to her teaching duties in Creative Writing, so the module itself is underpinned by recent pedagogic theory. Students that I have spoken to who have taken this module feel that it has aided their transition to university life and that its emphasis upon reflection (both self- and peer-) has provided a useful forum for *thinking about* transition itself, rather than simply experiencing it.

Appendix 4: Case Study – Sheffield Hallam University

Introduction

Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) runs a single honours degree, BA (Hons) in English Studies and also offers English as part of a number of named joint awards with cognate subject areas such as history or film studies. It aims to recruit about 170 students in total, with an entry requirement of 180 points, including a B in English.

The English Studies programme, as will be described in more detail below, comprises literary studies, language and creative writing. It has 25 staff in the department. The programme design has responded to University-wide initiatives such as semesterisation and a development towards named joint degrees, rather than a combined programme. It is a well-established programme in terms of its constitution and structure, with no plans for substantial modification.

The academic year is based around two 13 week semesters with no through year modules. Students must pass eight modules (120 credits) to complete each Level.

Curriculum design

The key characteristic of the programme design is a series of mandatory modules from each of the three component areas that build upon each other at each Level of the programme. In the first year, these mandatory modules occupy all of the first semester, with an element of choice introduced in the second semester. The mandatory literature modules that run through the programme are defined by period, starting with the Renaissance in the first Level, and by genre. Optional modules in Levels Two and Three allow students the opportunity to study in more depth areas that would already have been covered in the more general mandatory modules (for example, writing in the 1930s). The first semester Level One module, *Introduction to English Studies*, is a skills-based module, embedded in the subject and intended to aid transition to study in higher education (see further details below).

These mandatory modules are intended to ensure a set of core competencies and knowledges providing both a comprehensive overview of the field of study and a common base upon which module leaders can design optional modules. In addition, these mandatory modules ensure there is genuine coherence between the three component parts of the programme. Less mature programmes can sometimes be a rational bundling of cognate modules, without the deep interdisciplinary connections evident here.

Key Features

Transition and Embedded Skills

The English Studies programme at SHU has benefited from a comparatively early emphasis upon skills development at an institutional level, which demanded the expression of both subject-based and transferable skills in programme documents from the early 1990s. While not an entirely successful initiative at the outset, it has led to an ongoing process of refinement of approach and content that embodies many of the current debates surrounding first-year curricula described in the main body of this report.

In the first instance, a skills module was introduced that was intended to be generic, rather than subject-specific, although it was staffed from within the English department. It covered what was felt to be the basic skills students would require to engage with undergraduate study, essay-writing, what to do in lectures, what to do during periods of self-directed study etcetera. This module enjoyed a mixed reception from both students and staff. The latter, particularly, could see the benefits of tackling a perceived skills deficit in first-year students, however, both groups were largely unconvinced by a module that had the potential for being an unnecessary distraction from the analysis of, or reflection upon, textual production and meaning.

Part of this resistance was overcome by rebranding the module as *Introduction to English Skills* and realigning its content to the subject more explicitly. However, the term 'skills' still contained a connotation of remediation to students who felt (often mistakenly) that they arrived with skills that had been sufficiently developed through A Level or Access qualifications.

The current module, *Introduction to English Studies*, is similar to many 'soft-theory' modules common in English programmes, insofar as it asks questions such as 'What is English?', 'What do critics do?' and 'What is an author?' However, such sessions are used not only to help students adopt a more sophisticated attitude to the production of texts. Instead, more emphasis is placed upon the recognition and improvement of skills. For example, seminar discussions would have a topic that is clearly part of the first-year syllabus and focuses upon a literary text. But students are also asked to practice and reflect upon the seminar discussion as an activity in itself. Similarly, exercises in assessing essays from previous students (with their permission) are used to both reinforce knowledge and encourage students to be self-critical in their own writing practices. Or, conversations about how to read for undergraduate study, as opposed to A Level study, are based upon the history of the rise of English studies and development of the canon. Throughout, there is an emphasis upon students' developing an awareness of their own activities in concert with an explicit emphasis upon the transition to the intellectual and activity-based demands of undergraduate study.

In addition to the emphasis upon skills recognition taught in an embedded fashion, students are also required to complete a reflection sheet with each submitted piece of work. This combines tick box categories with space for additional comments and maintains an emphasis upon students taking forward the evaluation of others' performance in workshops into a continued self-evaluation.

Comment

This is a module that seems to achieve the difficult balance of providing students with new challenges, whilst also consciously trying to establish a bridge with A Level study. It also maintains an explicit emphasis upon developing skills within the subject specific context that students value. One recurrent phrase used in discussing activities within this module was 'conversation'. I got a real sense that while the teaching staff had a clear sense of what the module should achieve in order to support students' transition into undergraduate study, it was done so through dialogues that linked students' expectations with their prior learning experiences and assumptions about University study.

In addition to the virtues of dialogue between students and staff, there was clear emphasis upon conversations between students and using social interaction in the classroom to encourage the development of peer groups and friendships in the first semester.

The module is clearly the product of many years of development and – in relation to the issue of staffing first year curricula above – it is probably significant that one academic has taken responsibility for its continued design and is now a very senior member of the department, who remains committed to addressing the difficulties of transition.

This is not to suggest either that the module is an unmitigated success or that it does not continue to be the object of continued evaluation and adjustment. It does receive mixed responses from students who reportedly consider the content to be either too challenging or too simple. Also, rising student numbers will inevitably inhibit communication between staff and students both generally and in dialogue-based workshops. Similarly, the self-reflective essay submission sheets will vary in effectiveness depending on the integrity with which students approach them: if cursorily done, their potential impact upon the students' performance will clearly be limited.

Certainly, what does seem to be at the heart of the success of this module is getting students to be active in their learning. This is not confined to the core or skills modules alone and is part of the overall transition from target-based A Level study. The task of producing increasingly autonomous students is a common objective of undergraduate study. However, it does seem to achieve its manifesto of balancing the introduction of what university English is at SHU with the explanation of how to do it.

Combination of Subjects

The opportunity to combine literary studies, language and creative writing as either named joint degrees, or as minor or major components in an undergraduate programme is reasonably common. Having them integrated into a single award is less so. Whilst creative writing is now part of the RAE unit of assessment for English, these subjects have an apparent commonality of concerns that is not always shared by the practitioners themselves, or indeed by students who can feel threatened by either subject if they feel their abilities lie in one, rather than the other. There does, however, seem to be a mutually beneficial combination here.

Alongside the mandatory skills module described above and an *Introduction to Poetry* module, the first semester is completed with a creative writing module, *Verse and Narrative*. This module teaches students to write in a variety of genres and forms – sonnets, free verse, ballad etcetera – in a manner that at once allows students to develop their creative abilities and also enhances their awareness of literary form through practice. Notably, it exists alongside the taught poetry module in the first semester so students can benefit from practices of both reading and writing poetry.

In the second semester, a further mandatory module, *Describing Language*, introduces students to the terminology with which to describe functional parts of language – syntax, grammar, lexis etcetera. Students can then take either one or both of *Introduction to Drama* and *Introduction to Fiction*, with the

option to take a module from a modern language or a cognate subject area such as History instead to complete the first year.

The combination and approximate weighting of literature, creative writing and language mandatory modules within the overall programme (i.e. 50% literature, 25% creative writing and 25% language) is then carried through the rest of the degree programme with more emphasis on optional electives in the final year.

This combination produces students with a strong set of skills: they are expert readers of literary and non-literary texts, experts in language use and, as writers, possess an appreciation of the process of writing and the conventions of genre and form, as well as having the opportunity for vocational modules such as script-writing or journalism. The language modules will also contribute to the development of good essay writing skills through the acquisition of the rules of grammar and rhetoric. The emphasis on workshops and peer-appraisal in creative writing, together with the demands for drafting and redrafting, also inculcates habits of appraisal and editing that reinforce the self-reflective habits encouraged and formalised by the assessment hand-in sheets described above.

Comment

It is very difficult to argue that language awareness and competence should not be at the heart of the English subject area, or that the acts of reading and writing are not complementary activities. Where these areas do not always function effectively, it is typically where the discipline teams develop their curricula in isolation from (and sometimes in competition with) each other. This prevents – or at least inhibits – the development of integrated teaching, learning and assessment activities that have an identifiable rationale explicable to students in the presentation of 'what university English is and how do we do it' alluded to above.

This collaborative enterprise can be the result of the fortuitous combination of individuals at one institution – much as one individual's interest in issues of transition or e-learning can place a particular inflection on the activities of a department as a whole. It also true that combination with other disciplines such as Film and Television Studies could be similarly productive in developing students' skills in narratology, semiotics and contextual analysis. In effect, then, literary studies has long been recognised as a meeting place of a variety of disciplines and there is no genuine reason to privilege one combination over another.

Additionally, this programme does need to be carefully marketed to ensure that students apply to the course knowing exactly what it will entail: going to university to 'do English' is a horribly outdated and vague phrase that accounts – in my opinion – for a number of the issues surrounding transition and retention in our field. Even given the care with which this is articulated at Open Days, there remains a sense that the combination of textual analysis and literary creativity is a source of concern for some students. It is, nevertheless, a defining and, for me, exciting characteristic of this programme.

References

- Barlow, A. (2005) Transition from English at A Level to English at degree level. In Green, A. *Four Perspectives on Transition*. Egham: English Subject Centre.
- Bleiman, B. and Webster, L. (2006) *English at A Level: A Guide for Lecturers in Higher Education*. Egham: English Subject Centre.
- Colbert, B., et al. (2007) Designing and assessing online learning in English studies. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 6 (1): 75-90.
- Davies, S., Swinburne, D., and Williams, G. (eds.) (2006) *Writing Matters. The Royal Literary Fund Report on Student Writing in Higher Education*. London: The Royal Literary Fund.
- Ganobcsik-Williams, A. (2006) Building an academic writing programme from within a discipline. In Ganobcsik-Williams, L. *Teaching Academic Writing in UK Higher Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Green, A. (2005) *Four Perspectives on Transition: English Literature for Sixth Form to University*. Egham: English Subject Centre.
- Martin, P. W. (ed.) (2006) Introduction: the Condition of the Subject. In Martin, P.W. *English: The Condition of the Subject*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Miles, R. (2007) *Text.Play.Space: Creative Online Activities in English Studies*. English Subject Centre case study.
www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/casestudies
- Misra, M. (2007) Minds devoured by dog-eat-dog. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 16 March.
- Pieterick, J. (2007) *Embedding Writing in First Year Seminars: A Portable Model from the USA?* University of Wolverhampton unpublished paper.
- QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) (2007) *Subject Benchmark Statements: English* (QAA 146 02/07)
www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/
- Tysome, T. (2007) Today's student cohort 'not less intellectual, just different'. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 6 June.

The English Subject Centre Report Series

Electronic copies are available on the English Subject Centre website:

www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/reports.php. For print copies, please email esc@rhul.ac.uk.

- Report no. 1** **Admission Trends in Undergraduate English: statistics and attitudes,**
Sadie Williams, April 2002, ISBN 0902194437
- Report no. 2** **The English Degree and Graduate Careers,**
John Brennan and Ruth Williams, January 2003, ISBN 0902194631
- Report no. 3** **Postgraduate Training in Research Methods: Current Practice and Future Needs in English,**
Sadie Williams, February 2003, ISBN 0902194682
- Report no. 4** **Access and Widening Participation: A Good Practice Guide,**
Siobhán Holland, February 2003, ISBN 0902194739
- Report no. 5** **English and IT,**
Michael Hanrahan, December 2002
- Report no. 6** **Creative Writing: A Good Practice Guide,**
Siobhán Holland, February 2003, ISBN 090219478X
- Report no. 7** **External Examining in English,**
Philip Martin, April 2003, ISBN 0902194933
- Report no. 8** **Survey of the English Curriculum and teaching in UK Higher Education,**
Halcrow Group, Philip Martin and Jane Gawthrope, October 2003, ISBN 0902194291
- Report no. 9** **Part-time Teaching: A Good Practice Guide,**
Siobhán Holland, August 2004, ISBN 0902194291
- Report no. 10** **Four Perspectives on Transition: English Literature from Sixth Form to University,**
Andrew Green, February 2005, ISBN 090219498 4
- Report no. 11** **Living Writers in the Curriculum: A Good Practice Guide,**
Vicki Bertram and Andrew Maunder, March 2005, ISBN 090219414 3
- Report no. 12** **English at A Level: A Guide for Lecturers in Higher Education,**
Barbara Bleiman and Lucy Webster, August 2006, ISBN 1-905846-03-7
- Report no. 13** **Teaching Shakespeare: A Survey of the Undergraduate Level in Higher Education,**
Neill Thew, September 2006, ISBN 1-905846-04-5
- Report no. 14** **As Simple as ABC? Issues of transition for students of English Language A Level
going on to study English Language/Linguistics in Higher Education,**
Angela Goddard and Adrian Beard, March 2007, ISBN 1-905846-05-4
- Report no. 15** **The Taught MA in English,**
Samantha Smith, August 2007, ISBN 1-905846-13-9
- Report no. 16** **Teaching the Teachers: Higher Education and the Continuing Professional Development
of English Teachers,**
Andrew Green, February 2008, ISBN 1-905846-146
- Report no. 17** **In at the Deep End? The First Year in Undergraduate English Literature,**
David Ellis, June 2008, ISBN 1-905846-153

The English Subject Centre supports all aspects of the teaching and learning of English in higher education in the United Kingdom. It is a Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy www.heacademy.ac.uk

As one of its activities, the Subject Centre gathers and disseminates information to the subject community. This report series publishes the outcomes of substantial projects undertaken or commissioned by the Subject Centre.



ISBN 978-1-905846-15-3



English Subject Centre

Supporting teaching and learning in English Literature, English Language and Creative Writing across UK Higher Education.

The English Subject Centre,
Royal Holloway, University of London,
Egham TW20 0EX
T 01784 443221 • esc@rhul.ac.uk
www.english.heacademy.ac.uk