

The Experience of Joint Honours Students of English in UK Higher Education



John Hodgson

Series Editor: Jane Gawthrope

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1. Introduction

“The more one believes in the relevant discipline, the less is one likely to feel happy about permitting undergraduates to devote the years of an honours course to literary studies alone.” (Leavis 1948:35)

The world of University English has changed materially and ideologically since these words were written. Leavis’s “relevant discipline” of practical criticism has been transformed by literary and cultural theory, and his sketch for an “English School”, written during the years of the Second World War, did not anticipate the expansion of University education, modular courses, and the internet. Nonetheless, approximately one-fifth of undergraduate university students of English in the UK currently study the subject as part of a joint honours course. This figure does not include students who study English Literature alongside other varieties of English (such as Language study or Creative Writing). According to statistics derived from the 2010 National Student Survey, the most popular disciplines with which English Studies are combined include History (17%), Teacher Training (16%), Drama (10%), and Philosophy (7%). We have little direct evidence about the experience of these students: how they come to embark on joint honours study, what benefits they may gain, and what difficulties they may encounter.

To gain some insight into these and other questions, the English Subject Centre commissioned me in 2010 to conduct a focus group study of the experience of joint honours students of English within UK universities. This followed a previous study of the experience of students of English in UK higher education (Hodgson 2010). It was felt that the experience of joint honours students would complement the findings of the previous study, while gaining new information from placing English in a wider experiential context.

It was decided on this occasion to interview joint honours English students from five UK universities in both city and campus locations. The Subject Centre and I wrote separately to the head of the English department to explain the project, seek their involvement, and promise confidentiality for the institution and its students. When agreement from a Head of Department had been gained, I forwarded an email letter for circulation to students, inviting them to contact me directly if they wished to take part. The letter explained the project to the students and offered them an incentive of a £15 Amazon token.

Seven focus groups were conducted; the discussions, each of which lasted between 50 and 90 minutes, were recorded, transcribed and analysed. I talked with a total of 24 students (twenty female and four male) from two pre-92 and three post-92 institutions. This gender balance is roughly in line with the national ratio of female/male undergraduate students of English (Gawthrop and Martin 2003). Subjects combined with English by the students included (numbers of students in brackets): History (3), Philosophy (3), Politics (3), Music (2), Psychology (2), Cultural Studies (2), Criminology (1), Education (1), English Language (1), Film Studies (1), Information Systems (1), Italian (1), Journalism (1) Publishing (1) and Sociology (1).

During each session, I used a cue sheet to guide the conversation (Appendix: 13.1 below) while allowing the students to develop topics naturally. The themes of the discussion were proposed by the Subject Centre and discussed in advance. It seemed important firstly to discover how the students had come to joint honours study of the particular subjects they had chosen. Having embarked on their course, how did they see themselves - as a joint honours student, or as more identified with one subject than the other? What were the advantages and disadvantages (including practical considerations) of joint honours study, and how far did they feel that their tutors were aware of their joint honours status? What synergies and connections did they find between their subjects, and how did they cope with different expectations, requirements and teaching styles? How had joint honours study affected their choice of dissertation topics, and, in the longer term, their career aspirations? How could joint honours students be better supported, and what advice would they give to others considering joint honours study?

Each of these sessions was transcribed, and analysed (as in the previous report) in the light of Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) adaptation of Halliday’s (1978) three metafunctions of language. The conversations were seen in terms of their interpersonal function (constructing relationships between the participants, including the researcher), their ideational function (conveying information), and their textual or discursive formation (revealing ideology). One difference from the previous report is that these individual analyses of the focus groups are not included (although an extract from the transcription of one focus group session is given in Appendix 13.2 below). This report focuses in turn on each of the questions asked, and attempts to give a full account of the answers (explicit and implicit) given by the students. It includes a subsection, *Students’ Specific Concerns about English*, which attempts to articulate certain aspects of student experience in English study which did not appear to be specific to joint honours students, but which arose in most of the discussions in relation to students’ experience of their other subjects. Although this topic was not part of the original brief, these concerns seem worth recording in view of the aspirations for joint honours English study suggested above.

1.1 The Universities

The Universities visited were all situated in England. Three had previously accommodated me when conducting the research for my previous report on the Experience of Studying English in UK Higher Education. To preserve confidentiality, they (and their students) have been given pseudonyms:

Hunsford: post-92 University
Kympton: post-92 University
Lambton: post-92 University
Netherfield: pre-92 Russell Group University
Rosings: pre-92 University

1.2 The students

Hunsford University

Adam had taken A Level English Literature, and was now in the first year of a joint honours course in English Literature and Education Studies.

Bibi was a second year joint honours student of English Literature and Sociology, both of which subjects she had taken at A Level.

Miranda, who had taken A Level English Literature at school, was now in her final year of a joint honours course in English Literature and Journalism.

Pauline, also a second year student, was taking joint honours in English Literature and Philosophy, both of which she had studied at A Level.

Rebecca had studied English Literature and Philosophy to A Level. She had originally intended to take single honours Philosophy, but was now in the first year of a joint honours course in Philosophy and English Literature.

Sally had studied English Literature at A Level, and was now following joint honours in English Literature and Politics. She was in her second year.

Kympton University

Glenys had studied A Level English Literature at school and was in the second year of her joint honours in English Literature and Music.

James had taken A Levels in English Literature and Music, and was in the first year of a joint honours degree course in both subjects.

Jasmine had studied A Level English Literature at school. She was following a joint honours course in English Literature and Publishing, and was currently in her second year.

Lambton University

Carla had taken A Level equivalent courses in English and Media Production, and was in her second year of her joint honours course in English Literature and Film Studies.

Molly had taken A Levels in Psychology and English Literature, and was now in the third year of a joint honours course in these subjects.

Netherfield University

Belinda had originally applied to take Philosophy and Religious Studies at University. She was now in the second year of her joint honours degree, studying English Literature with Philosophy.

Carey had taken A Levels in History, English Literature, Textiles and French. She was now in the third (final) year of a joint honours degree course in English and Cultural Studies.

Charlie was a second year student. She had started University by taking single honours French, but was now engaged in joint honours study of English Literature and Italian.

Felicity had taken the International Baccalaureate in her sixth form college and was now in the final year of her joint honours course in Cultural Studies and English Literature.

Susan was a third-year student joint honours in English Literature and History. She had taken both subjects at A Level.

Viv was a third-year joint honours student in English Literature and English Language. She had taken both subjects at A Level.

Yvonne's A Levels had included English Literature and she was now in her final year of a joint honours course in English Literature and Philosophy.

Rosings University

Alan had taken English Literature A Level. He had initially applied to take a joint course in English Literature and creative writing, but was now in the third year of a combined joint honours course in English Literature and Politics.

Cindy had studied A Level English and was a third-year student in English Literature and Criminology.

Daisy had originally wanted to study single honours History. She was now a second year English Literature and History student.

Estelle had taken A Level English and was a second year joint honours student of English Literature and Information Systems.

Richard was a first year English Literature and Psychology student.

Sandra was in the first year of a joint course in English Literature and History, and was also taking a qualification in teaching English as a foreign language.

2. Reasons for choice of joint honours

The students' reasons for having chosen joint honours study included contingency, academic pleasure and vocational preparation. Two reported a pragmatic concern to compensate for a failure to achieve the three A's at A Level required for single honours study by their chosen University. Yvonne, at Netherfield, had originally wanted to take English Literature as a single honours subject. When her A Level grades turned out to be insufficient for entry to this course, she decided to pursue joint honours English Literature and Philosophy, as "I've always been interested in politics and ethical things". One of her school teachers had recommended she apply for joint honours at Netherfield, as the Philosophy course there seemed appropriate. She told me that she was very happy with her joint subjects. Daisy, at Rosings, had originally wanted to study single honours History, but she had not achieved the A Levels she had hoped for. She had enjoyed English Literature at school and found that she was qualified to take joint honours in English Literature and History, "so that seemed the obvious choice".

A few students had found themselves taking a joint course more or less by accident, sometimes as a result of suggestions from teachers, parents or contemporaries. Charlie, at Netherfield, said that she "wasn't meant to be doing this course at all!" She had commenced a single honours degree in French, but she had so enjoyed her first term subsidiary subjects, English and Italian, that she had re-enrolled as a joint honours student of these. Estelle, at Rosings, was taking an unusual combination of English Literature and Information Systems. Originally, she had intended to take single honours in computer science, but one of her English teachers had encouraged her to continue her studies in English also. She had been attracted by the literary texts and had decided to combine the two disciplines, despite their apparent difference.

Some students had enjoyed equally two of their A Level subjects and wished to continue both at University. Susan, at Netherfield, couldn't choose whether to specialise in English Literature or History, "and it turned out I could do them both here!" Viv, also at Netherfield, had similarly enjoyed both English Literature and English Language as A Level subjects and had continued her combined studies into higher education. Felicity, of Netherfield, had taken the International Baccalaureate at school and said she was "used to a broad approach": she had chosen a joint course of Literature and Cultural Studies.

Carla, of Lambton University, had chosen her joint course partly because of her physical disabilities. She had taken a college course in media production and had hoped to become a journalist, but had discovered that this would be "quite fast moving, and because of my limitations it's not appropriate". She felt that a joint degree in English Literature and Film Studies fed her interest in contemporary media while also offering her opportunities to write academically at a high level.

Several students had chosen a joint honours course with an eye on their future employment. Carey, of Netherfield, wanted to go into the theatre, and thought that a combined course in English Literature and Cultural Studies would give her a wider cultural awareness. Belinda (Netherfield) had originally applied to take Philosophy and Religious Studies, but, having worked in the English department of her old High School during her pre-university year, had decided to become a secondary school teacher and thus combined English Literature with Philosophy. Cindy (Rosings) was interested in Criminology but uncertain that she wanted to pursue this as a career; the addition of English Literature, she felt, broadened her career options and allowed her to follow a subject she had enjoyed at school. Rebecca, at Hunsford, had wanted to take single honours Philosophy, but her father had suggested that Philosophy did not appear to be as "solid" a subject as English Literature. Consequently, she had added English Literature because, as "the fourth most applied for degree", this would give her "a broader scope of job prospects". Sally, also at Hunsford, concurred: "you get a certain respect for studying a subject like English." Molly, at Lambton, had enjoyed her A Level Psychology course but was unsure whether she wanted to work in the field. A joint course in English Literature and Psychology would allow her to choose a wider range of future employment, possibly to include teaching. (Although only one of the students was actually taking a course in teacher training, more than one mentioned English Literature as a suitable subject in case they decided to go into teaching.)

Adam, at Hunsford, was the only student who felt he might have made a wrong choice of joint honours. He had originally wanted to take single honours English Literature, with a view to teaching English in secondary school, but the careers service at his University had advised him to take joint honours in English Literature and Education Studies. Although still in his first year, he already felt that he might later find himself at a status disadvantage compared to students who had taken single honours English Literature followed by a one-year PGCE course.

3. How joint honours students identify themselves

Many of the interviewees identified themselves as joint honours students who had made a positive choice to study two disciplines. Even those who had decided to follow such widely disparate subjects as English Literature and Information Systems might find themselves (in Estelle's words) "split down the middle". "I have friends in both departments," she told me. "I'm fairly balanced. If anything, I do more English work now because I'm reading more." Susan, at Netherfield, said that her feelings for her subjects depended on whichever module she happened to be working on at the time. "You enjoy a year so much more if you have one enjoyable module or lecturer or more interesting material." Daisy (Rosings) similarly said that overall she felt equally weighted on both sides: "it depends on the modules I choose". Glenys and James, the joint English Literature/Music students at Kympton, felt equally committed to both subjects. James spent more time practising music, which he saw as a "hobby", and enjoyed the activity (very different from reading and writing essays) involved in such practice. Bibi, at Hunsford, said that she felt like a joint honours student because her subjects (English Literature and Sociology) "demanded similar things although from different perspectives".

Despite their personal commitment, however, some students felt that it was difficult to explain their subject choices publicly. Carey, at Netherfield, who had applied to study at both Oxford and Cambridge, had been told by a school teacher that she had probably failed because she had indicated on her application form an interest in joint honours. Some students felt that joint honours courses were associated with broad and/or superficial study, and that one of their two subjects might be perceived as more serious or weighty than the other. Yvonne told me that she would define herself in conversation as a Philosophy student because "Philosophy is a bit more serious [than English Literature]!". However, most students gave English Literature the benefit of higher seriousness. Rebecca (Hunsford) claimed that English Literature would be regarded as more "solid" than Philosophy. Felicity (Netherfield) told me: "I always tell people I study Literature because people recognise it more and think of it as a more serious subject [than Cultural Studies]. James, the English Literature and Music student at Kympton, said that "one of the great things" about a joint honours degree was "having some grounded subject [English Literature] and having something else that you can dip in and out of".

Students' identifications were affected to some extent by differences between the amounts of study time required by each of their two subjects. Sally, at Hunsford, told me: "A lot of time I feel like I'm a pure English student because I've got mountains of work to do." In lectures, however, she felt "joint in both". Rebecca, also of Hunsford, said that she currently saw herself as more of a Philosophy student, "because I've got two modules in Philosophy and only one module in English Literature - even though they are worth the same amount of credits." Adam, at Hunsford, currently spent only two hours a week in Education classes, for which, he claimed, no preparation was required. "I thought English was short," he said, "at four hours' contact time!" As reported above, he was dissatisfied with his Education Studies, and saw himself primarily as an English student.

The ethos of the departments was a factor in students' identifications. Alan, of Rosings, told me that he felt more part of the Politics school than of the English school. "We get together quite a lot." The English department, he felt, was less of a community: "We come to our seminars, we come to our lectures, we do our thing and then we all go off and do something else. As soon as you leave the seminar room in English you've left for the week." Cindy, in the same University, agreed: "I feel a lot more in contact with my Criminology than I do my English. When you walk into [an English tutor's] office you don't really know them, like you do with Criminology."

Some students identified more strongly with one of their two subjects for vocational reasons. Richard, for example, saw himself as primarily a psychologist, because he understood that his course (unusually, he said, for a joint honours subject) would give him a vocational certification. Molly, at Lambton, felt similarly: so long as she took her dissertation in Psychology, she told me, her degree would be accredited by the British Psychological Society. She was hoping to take a master's degree at Lambton in forensic psychology. Carey, at Netherfield, had taken Cultural Studies to prepare herself for future employment in the theatre, and felt that the disciplinary requirements of most of her English essays were similar to those of Cultural Studies. As chair of the Cultural Studies student panel, she told me: "I've been trying to protect [the subject] a little bit, because it's been under threat."

4. Perceived advantages of being a joint honours student

Several students said that they relished the variety and challenge of taking a joint honours course. Belinda (Netherfield) said that studying two subjects meant that she always found interest in her current work. Richard (Rosings) “perceived doing one subject as eventually getting a bit boring”. More than one student commented on the pleasure of working in different parts of the University, and of meeting a wider range of students and staff than would otherwise be the case. Estelle (taking English Literature and Information Systems at Rosings) said: “It’s two completely different sets of people. It’s different sets of work and I like the variety.” James (Kympton) liked the contrast between the environment and culture of English and Music. “It’s refreshing to go between them both ... rather than being confined to one subject and seeing the same teachers.” He liked the visual variety of going “into a different class or different part of the campus”. He and Glenys, the other Music student at Kympton, both commented on the kinetic differences between their studies. According to Glenys: “Music is of a different nature: we don’t have to read, we don’t really have many text books ... It’s more like practical tasks.” James had a deadline in two weeks “to play five songs to my teachers”. This, he said, “doesn’t look as [demanding] as ... two novels a week to read,” but the preparation would take him “hours and hours”. He and Glenys both felt that their joint course in English and Music paradoxically gave them more time to read the English texts than was possible for students taking single honours English. Glenys said that she had to read only half the number of books required of a single honours student, but felt that she was still gaining “a wider understanding of literature and getting through a lot of books”. James, however, had insufficient time for reflective reading. “If I read a book I like to read about it then think about it, read bits of it again, or read some secondary reading about it. But you can’t, because every week you have to read a new book, and I’ve got behind.”

In contradiction to the view that joint honours might be perceived as a soft option, some students hoped that taking a joint course would look good on their CV. Cindy (Rosings) thought that her record would demonstrate her determination, hard work and individualism: “You’re slightly different and you’ve dared to combine the two [subjects].” Rebecca’s views had been affected by those of her father, who employed a number of staff in his business. “It’s all based on money,” she told me. She hoped to teach Religious Studies, and thought that a degree in English and Philosophy would make her attractively flexible in terms of subject competence. Miranda (Hunsford) had gained the impression from careers advisers that employers were “more impressed by a joint honours degree”. The majority of employers, she thought, looked for breadth rather than depth - “unless you go into something very specific, like being a doctor”.

4.1 Synergies and connections between subjects of study

The most frequently mentioned benefit of joint honours study was conceptual range and understanding. “There’s so much overlap,” said Yvonne. “It enhances each subject with the other one.” Students spoke both of synergies and connections between their subjects of study and of other, unexpected connections that had arisen from their joint honours courses.

Molly (Lambton) had found that her study of Psychology had helped her to understand psychoanalytic approaches to literature, and that the method of discourse analysis she had learned while writing her Psychology dissertation was useful in English. Richard, the first year Psychology student at Rosings, expressed a similar view, albeit in a curious manner: “There’s a lot of Psychology that crosses over into Freud and various others.” Daisy (Rosings) had found that her work in History had “given a context” to some of her English Literature studies. In her first year, her course in early modern History had provided a useful framework for her literary study of Shakespeare. More recently, she had studied late 20th-century American History, which had helped her reading of modernist and postmodernist literature. “It helps you understand the kind of thinking more,” she said, “when you know the context it was written in.” Sally (Hunsford) had found that her Politics course had helped her understand certain aspects of *Middlemarch*. Yvonne (Netherfield) had studied aspects of Feminism within Philosophy and within English Literature, and had found the two approaches complementary. “In Philosophy,” she told me, “it’s very political and what’s happening now; and we look at the science.” In English Literature, on the other hand, the approach was a textual examination of “what someone said”. According to Sandra (Rosings), English Literature and History were “incredibly similar”, although History, she felt, might involve “a bit more research”. Felicity felt that the conceptual frameworks of English Literature and Cultural Studies were very similar, although Cultural Studies involved a wider range of texts: “You can look at film, music, images; there’s a lot more variety.”

Some students found that there were useful contextual links between English Literature and such apparently vocational subjects as Journalism and Publishing. According to Jasmine (Kympton), English Literature and Publishing went “hand-in-hand”. Her study of the history of the book in her Publishing course helped her to look at literature “not only as the texts but also all the surroundings and how publishers influence texts”. Her Literature course allowed her to “actually know the contents of the books as well”. Like Molly, who studied Film at Lambton, Miranda (Hunsford) saw her media course as offering a particular purpose and audience to her writing: “When you’re writing a report in Journalism,” she told me, “there’s quite a lot of English in it!”

Two students at Hunsford, Pauline and Rebecca, had found that taking Philosophy had broadened their intellectual scope in an unexpected way. At school, Pauline had never been very interested in what she called “hard core academic subjects” such as science. Her University study of Philosophy, however, had got her “so into science now” that she was considering taking a further course in science after graduating. Rebecca had “dropped school science as soon as I could, because I couldn’t stand it”, but she was very interested in the scientific elements in her Philosophy degree course, and could now join in scientific conversations with her younger brothers, who, according to her, were “stupidly intelligent”.

Several students felt that reading English Literature was a definite help in writing good essays in their other subject. According to Yvonne, English tutors “hammer you into getting your essays perfect”. James, at Hunsford, said that, because of

his work in English, he found essay writing in Music easier than did his single honours companion students. Richard (Rosings) asserted: "You can express yourself better in the subject as well. You have some competitive advantage in writing over other people." As the only English Literature joint honours student in her Information Systems class, Estelle (Rosings) had been given the role of proof-reader. "I get called all over the labs to read people's work through and check their spelling and their grammar, before they submit it. I have a long list of people I do that for." Her English Literature studies assisted her Information Systems work as well. "We have to read a lot of heavy going textbooks on the theory side of computing and especially on the business side of it. I find I get a quicker understanding and can read them through quicker, and my notes are more thorough and clearer than other people's because of the English." Cindy agreed that she was "more able to skim read and find the more important bits in the texts for my Criminology, because of my English". Molly (Lambton) claimed that her studies in English Literature had developed her confidence, because her interpretations did not have to be based on other people's research: "You don't get that confidence [in Psychology] of saying, 'Well, this is what I think and this is where it comes from.'" Like Molly, Daisy (Rosings) enjoyed the relative freedom of interpretation in English Literature: "History is very analytical and ... factual; to do something like English where you ... interpret things yourself, you've got a bit of your own agency ... I think it really complements well."

Although the great majority of the students found productive connections between their subjects, the Music students at Kympton expressed some disagreement. Glenys told me: "I don't actually find Music and English relevant to each other from what we actually learn in the classroom. The only thing that makes them connected in any way will be essay writing, but I don't really write that many Music essays anyway!" James felt that, apart from "a slight advantage [in essay-writing], I don't really see that there is much of a definite connection." He allowed that the poetry he wrote (outside his English Literature studies) influenced his song writing.

5. Perceived disadvantages of being a joint honours student

The students mentioned a number of difficulties that had arisen as a result of their joint honours work. These were intellectual, practical and social, and were often the other side of the coin to the advantages described above.

Miranda (Hunsford) spoke for many when she said: "One of the less nice things about being a joint honours student is that you can't do exactly the modules that you want to do because they don't fit with your other subject." Molly (Lambton) expressed the frustration of "not getting to do some modules that you really want to take". Jasmine, of Kympton, described the "feeling of missing out on something". Like other students, she often heard lecturers referring to modules that she hadn't been able to study. She exclaimed: "My timetable is all sewn up with compulsories so I can't get to choose what I want to do." Double modules were also a difficulty: Jasmine felt that she had to "structure my timetable for one subject around the timetable of the other. I can never really choose what I want to do." Glenys, at Kympton, also commented that, when courses used double modules, "you have to be really selective for each subject and I feel I'm not learning as many things as I would like." Sally, at Hunsford, agreed that a lack of module choice could be frustrating. "There are so many fantastic ones that you get in single honours that you are not allowed to do in joint honours." As suggested above, Adam, at Hunsford, was concerned that his joint honours studies in English Literature and Education were not offering him the opportunities gained by single honours students in English Literature. He told me: "This year the single honours students [in English Literature] are doing three modules, whereas I'm only doing one core module." He felt that: "They are gaining, whereas I'm not, in English."

Timetabling was sometimes a related problem. According to Felicity in Netherfield: "You often lose out and aren't able to do classes you want because of clashes." Viv, in the same University, said that she knew a few people who had "had to chop and change and take modules they didn't really want to". But she had "been able to take all the things that I need". Molly, at Lambton, explained that, because of timetabling, she currently had to go straight from a two-hour English Literature lecture to a two-hour Psychology lecture. "I find it's a struggle on a Tuesday to keep my concentration up for those four hours, and to switch in the middle of it. It is right over lunch as well, so I don't get anything to eat, to break it up."

While some students found that working on different parts of the campus could be stimulating, others - such as Carla from Lambton - said that it had taken longer to get to know the groups she was working with. "It's been over two campuses, and with two very different groups of people who were hoping to achieve very different goals." She felt that she did now have relationships with both groups she worked with, but: "If I were doing single honours I don't think it would have taken as long as it has." Sally, at Hunsford, was split between two campuses some miles apart, and had lectures for both her subjects on the same day. She had to use two different campus libraries: "All my English books are here, all my Politics books are there!" Susan, at Netherfield, was taking joint honours in History and English

Literature. History was run on a seminar basis with a maximum of 20 students in a group, while her English Literature course involved weekly lectures and less frequent seminars. In her smaller History groups, she felt "more encouraged to speak". She had taken a long time to make friends in English Literature because of short acquaintance in large lecture rooms. She compared the experience of "medics and engineers" who, she said, were together the whole day. She felt that her experience as a joint honours student was "quite isolating and fragmented", but conceded: "But then that gives you choice as well."

Molly, at Lambton, thought that taking a joint honours course was "a whole lot more challenging" in terms of organising one's time. Daisy, at Rosings, used a diary to keep abreast of the commitments of her two subjects. "It's saved my life," she told me, "writing all the bits down." She was looking forward to the third year when she would be able to focus more fully on her dissertation subject. Molly reported that on one occasion she had had two assignments due on the same day for English Literature and Psychology. She didn't feel this was a matter for complaint: "obviously across the board they can't ensure that all [subject deadlines] are spread out." Jasmine (Lambton), however, exclaimed: "In my first year I had four deadlines in one week - which was just terrible and hard to manage." Essay deadlines and requirements could drastically affect students' attention to their subjects. Richard, at Rosings, told me that in his previous term: "My Politics assessments were before Christmas and both my English assessments were after Christmas." For this reason, English had become "incredibly important" over the Christmas period and Politics "didn't exist at all". "All of a sudden I've lost Politics for the last four weeks!" Felicity, in Netherfield, raised a significant issue (that will be discussed more fully later) when she said that "in terms of essay writing, each subject expects a slightly different thing". Even though English Literature and Cultural Studies were "not that different", she felt that there were "slight variations" in the style of writing expected. "I sometimes catch myself," she said, "when I'm writing an English essay: hang on, that's more Cultural Studies! I've got to make it more English!"

Several students commented that it would be supportive if lecturers in different departments could talk to each other about their joint students. Viv, at Netherfield, who was taking a joint course in English Language and Literature, explained that during the first two years of her course the Language and Literature departments had been quite separate. "They had separate offices on different floors - I didn't feel they really communicated with each other." She was glad that the two departments had now moved into the same office. "If I have any problems with my course as a whole I can go to that office, and that's where it will be sorted, rather than my having to go here and there."

A further disadvantage reported by the students was the prejudice against joint honours courses that they occasionally encountered. The opinion of Carey's school teacher, who had told her that she had probably failed to get into Oxford or Cambridge because she had indicated an interest in taking a joint course, was not unusual: the students had encountered similar views from parents, teachers and contemporaries.

Accordingly, several students discussed the status of joint honours study and of English within this. Molly (Lambton) said that she had had contradictory fears, before starting her course, about choosing a joint course. She was aware of a "general attitude in society" that "because you're a joint honours student you're be doing less work" but had also been worried that she might have to study "double the modules" of a single honours student. Her experience had been that a joint honours student had to do "exactly the same [amount] as everyone else", but the work seemed harder because "you're constantly changing your thinking style". With regard to her former fear, she had found that her combination of Psychology and English Literature had impressed people, "because their view of these subjects [is of] something very high up." However, this would not have been the case (she said) if she had studied sport. Carla (Lambton) had found that people had assumed that her joint subject, Film Studies, was an easy option. English Literature was generally regarded as high status: Miranda (Hunsford) referred to this as her "academic show off subject". However, Yvonne (Netherfield) regarded Philosophy as "more serious" than English Literature, and had chosen to do her dissertation in the former subject.

6. Apparent staff awareness of joint honours status

Students' opinions varied as to how far their tutors understood their joint honours status. In some cases, they were clearly aware: Miranda explained that Journalism at Hunsford was a half degree, and so every Journalism student was taking another subject, which itself often entered into conversation with tutors. Viv, at Netherfield, felt similarly that the English Language tutors were aware that many of their students were taking English Literature as well. "When they talk to about how to style your essays, they say: joint honours students do this; and single honours students do this." She had never had to explain that she was taking joint honours, and she felt "catered for as much as a single honours student". This, she felt, was probably because English Literature and Language was a common joint subject choice at Netherfield. Adam, at Hunsford, said that his English tutor grouped together people who were taking Education Studies "because she knew the timetabling issues and that we'd all be free at the same time." Similarly, his Education seminar tutor (an English graduate) would approach the English and Education students. "During break he'll come up to us and ask what we're doing, because he finds an interest in it."

Susan, in Netherfield, said that Literature and History were both "used to being the equal if not the dominant part of the course". As examples of "unequal" subject combinations, she cited History and Archaeology, or English Literature and Italian. Because of their superior status, she felt, History and English would "usually be quite accommodating with timetables if you explain the situation". After all, she stated, "they want you to get a good degree, so it looks good on them, so they may as well help you if they can." Cindy, in her third year at Rosings, was less sanguine: "Generally I think they are aware of our joint honours status ... but I do feel very often that one school doesn't really care about the other school. You can go up to them and say 'I'm in trouble, as I've got to get this essay in tomorrow for the other subject and, yes, I should have done it sooner,' and they say: 'Well, that's your problem!'" Different schools' lectures, essays or exams were often scheduled very close together, but, said Cindy, "they don't worry about that!" She had had to approach the timetabling office in order to resolve a clash of lecture slots. Alan, also at Rosings, had had to resolve a clash of lecture times between English Literature and Politics. "I will say," he told me, "that the admin department in both schools were more than willing to really go out of their way to help me out." In terms of assessments, though, he agreed: "Whatever you've got for your other subject, that's tough, really."

Many of the respondents felt that, in lectures and seminars, tutors often did not make allowance for the presence of joint honours students. James (Kympton) told me that his Music tutor would refer back to a course that all the single honours students had taken "and I feel like I should have been there". Jasmine (Kympton) commented that her second year English Literature tutor kept referring to a first year module that had been compulsory for single honours students. "I think, well, we have a lot of joint honours students in English Literature, so if it was

really so crucial for second year modules they should have made it compulsory for everybody!" Bibi, at Hunsford, had recently had to read and write on George Eliot's *Middlemarch* while preparing a lengthy Sociology assignment. She said: "I think sometimes, to judge from the workload, they [English Literature tutors] think you only do English Literature." Molly, in Lambton, recommended that staff should try to understand the writing requirements of other subjects. "If English went over to Psychology to see how we had to write, they'd be more understanding; actually it's not as easy as they might think to switch styles and reference systems and all the rest of it." She added: "Equally, Psychology don't have a clue how we write in English." In her view, "We don't really get appreciated for what we have to do."



7. How joint honours students cope with different expectations, requirements and teaching styles

Molly's comment on the different expectations (in terms of essay writing) of her tutors in English Literature and Psychology opens consideration of the ways in which the students dealt with differing subject epistemologies and tutor expectations. Glenys (Kympton) spoke for many students when she said that it had taken her a time to understand what was required by her English tutors. In the first year of her degree, she had wondered why only one week was given to the study of each primary text: she had been used to a much longer period of study at A Level. Now, she thought: "It's more the canon of literature – it's like an overview of everything, rather than just studying one thing." However, when asked to describe what was specific about English Literature study, several students said the subject allowed deep focus on small areas of text, whereas subjects such as History, Philosophy and Cultural Studies required a wider contextual knowledge. Felicity, at Netherfield, told me: "In English you can literarily focus on two texts. Obviously you should read all the other ones, but it does help to be very focused." In Cultural Studies, by comparison: "You need to go to every lecture and have a good idea of all the texts and put everything in context." The close textual study of literature was often associated with an opportunity for free and personal interpretation, which most if the students felt more appropriate to English than to their other subject. Jasmine, at Kympton, told me that English was the subject "where I can have more free interpretations". Partly because of this emphasis on personal response, some students said that English sometimes offered a relief from their complementary subject. Molly of Lambton said that she found that English "gives me a variety of writing and styles, and I get a break from a scientific rigour of Psychology: I can just be free to express my ideas in English".

The interpretive freedom that some students felt with English Literature was based in part upon an extensive background knowledge which they did not necessarily have in the case of their joint subject. Belinda (Netherfield) told me: "I like Philosophy but I don't have as much background knowledge of it, whereas with English I read so many books prior to my degree and I feel like I know what I'm talking about, without even touching the syllabus in the first place!" English Literature texts, Belinda felt, were "very readable, very friendly and very interesting: you get a much more personal feel of them." Although she had to take into account the views of other critics, "you can write what you believe about them, and you've a fair chance of being right."

In other ways, however, the students sometimes found the focus on primary literary texts restricting. "In English," said Molly, "we are not encouraged to use secondary sources of information; which is very hard for me as a Psychology student, because I'm constantly looking for things to back up my argument." Even when textual interpretation was related to cultural theory – "the postcolonial, the feminism, the Marxism and all that stuff", as Yvonne put it – some students felt that the study of English

was not (in Yvonne's words) "based on solid ground". These students sometimes characterised their complementary subject as having more to do with the real world. "With Philosophy," said Belinda (Netherfield), "you tend to look from the inside out. You look at the argument and then you look at how it actually is in the world ... With English Literature, you have to look at it from the outside inwards." According to Yvonne (Netherfield), Philosophy was "more political and what's happening now". Viv (Netherfield), who combined English Literature and English Language for her joint honours course, felt that Literature essays were "more daunting [than Language essays] because [response is] so subjective". It would be easier, she felt, to write a Language study on (for example) the powerlessness of women's speech, or the differences between men and women's speech: "you would have the findings there rather than creating your own findings." Philosophy, said Belinda, required a "balancing out" of other people's opinions, as opposed to "putting your own views and finding critics that support or contradict them". "In English," said Molly, "they encourage you very much to develop your own ideas from the text", whereas, in Psychology: "You can't just put forward a point without backing it up with previous research reports."

Students commented further on the nature of textual study (of what Bibi called "olden type" texts) characteristic of English Literature. Felicity (Netherfield) complained that, in English: "Everything has been said before; there's nothing new or fresh about your ideas." She thought that she always did better in Cultural Studies "because you can be more creative". According to Belinda (Netherfield), in English: "There's no argument, there's just text, and you have to know about certain things to evaluate the text." Kerry (Netherfield) said: "With English Literature I always feel a little bit restricted ... I'm probably more confident in Cultural Studies because I am dealing with subject matter I have chosen and feel confident with."

In some cases, negative feelings about English seemed to be related to the students' feeling about their tutors. Miranda (Hunsford) thought that English was "very formal and academic", and that her English tutors were "a lot less approachable and a lot more formal" than her Journalism tutors. "In Journalism," she said, "they will take your ideas seriously, as if you're on a level with them." Sally (Hunsford) had criticised one of the characters in *Middlemarch* during one of her seminars, and had been "told off severely" for it. She felt that her tutors didn't want "to generalise [the book] and bring into a broader aspect." Her Politics tutors, on the other hand, would "begin a seminar by linking it to what's happening in the news this week, and make it broader and more flexible". Susan (Netherfield) similarly felt that English study should relate to contemporary concerns: "What is there left to say about a Victorian novel that people have written reams and reams of criticism about?" She conceded: "But then History is the same."

Indeed, students commented on the ideological similarities between their subjects, while noticing the differences in their approaches to knowledge. Susan (Netherfield) thought that English and History were discursively similar in certain respects

- both subjects were concerned with ideas, values and attitudes
 - but the evidence in History was based on more varied forms of data, and one developed a sense of what was given about a particular era. Her account is worth quoting at some length:

English and History are both about what drives people to do things and to react to things, but they're based on different material ... In History, Literature will come up as a primary source, whereas in Literature you concentrate on the text and then you work outwards to the historical context, because you do have to take that into account. You want to know what motivated that person to write that text, because texts both reflect and reinforce the values and attitudes of the time. So in English Literature you will quote the text and you will also quote the critics of the time. You'll rarely quote historical documents – you've got 2000 words, so you've got to stay quite focused ...

In History, Susan said, she would use written evidence such as speech and newspaper reports, and statistical data such as rates of imprisonment. "You talk about the ideas and values of the time as they manifest themselves in other ways besides written documents." Bibi, in Hunsford, similarly thought that Sociology and English Literature demanded "similar things, though obviously from different perspectives". She too referred to the textuality of English. "Sociology is more about the social, the world and how we interact in our society; whereas English is based on those olden kind of texts."

When students approached written assignments, differences between the kinds of knowledge and writing expected for each subject became crucial. The textual-analytic approach that (according to several students) characterised an English Literature essay was not wholly appropriate in the case of another subject. Susan told me: "I have to be careful sometimes when I'm doing a resource analysis in History. I'll analyse the source a bit too much, like I would in a Literature style, when I should expand the historical context." Viv had found that, even where the joint subject was English Language, "Language teachers are looking for different things from Literature lecturers." The poetry analysis within her English Language course was "linguistic and quite technical", whereas poetry analysis in Literature was "more subjective". In Susan's view, this distinction characterised the difference between the subjects. "Language," she told me, "is interested in theories or findings that have gone before. It's much more scientific. Literature likes that flowing of ideas and invention of new ideas and creativity." She attributed greater objectivity to Language studies. "Grammar is Grammar," she said, "as opposed to theory."

Belinda (Netherfield) contrasted the "personal feel" of Literature study to the "very, very abstract" ambience of Philosophy. By illustration, she referred to a Philosophy essay she had sent me. "I had to rely on what other people were saying [about Kant] and played their arguments off against each other because I wasn't confident that I can interpret what he was saying." Her Philosophy tutors had told the class not to worry if they didn't fully understand philosophers' writings: they should read secondary texts and balance the arguments of the commentators. This was a very different procedure from the

demands of literary study as she understood them, where "you can write what you think [about primary texts]. Obviously you've got the critics as well, but you can write what you believe on them, and you've a fair chance of being right."

Molly said that she appreciated the different writing styles required by Psychology and English Literature, "but sometimes it's very difficult if I've got two assignments to do around the same time – having to switch that mind set." Her English tutor had criticised her repeated use of the phrase "it could be argued that". "But in Psychology," she exclaimed, "you can't just make a claim out of thin air!" She felt that her English and Psychology tutors were looking for very different things. "In Psychology they really want you to look at other people's work and critique it: say, for example, this paper was good but there was a small sample size." By comparison, English tutors, in her view, "tend not to look for any critique of arguments. They just want you to pick up on what is there and really go deeper and analyse it."

Carla, of Lambton, said that the kinds of writing expected by Film Studies varied. Sometimes she had to write academically; at other times, her tutors expected critical writing for a particular market. "You're learning to write in a specific style that will be really suitable for some sort of critical or film magazine." She described this approach as "more skills-based, as opposed to academic". In Literature, on the other hand: "There's a set formula for all the essays."

Adam, in Hunsford, related the different writing styles expected by the two subjects to the mode of teaching. He said that Education Studies were taught "in an entirely different way from English. "It's more like the learning that I experienced in school, where you sit in desks and face the front." He had recently taken examinations in both subjects: this had been confusing because he had been taught to write in one style for English and another for Education, and to reference in two different ways. Sally, also in Hunsford, explained that her Politics tutors encouraged the use of the first person in essays, whereas her English tutors did not. "[Your opinion] has to be subtly weaved in." She had recently been writing an English essay in the company of a friend, who told her: "You can't put 'I' in it - what are you doing?" On the other hand, she claimed: "I'll be doing one thing perfectly - say criticising critics' arguments - perfectly in English but completely wrong in Politics!"

Some students experienced epistemological difference and uncertainty not only between their two joint subjects but within English itself. As stated above, Sally (Hunsford) had been surprised at being "told off severely" by her English tutor for her approach to a character in *Middlemarch*. Carla (Lambton) said ruefully: "I know they say that in English you can't be wrong if you can back it up but I find you actually can. I found that out a lot this year." Susan (Netherfield) claimed that she had written two essays "in exactly the same style, going straight by the letter of the style sheets", yet her approach had been criticised by one tutor and not by the other. "It's hard enough," she said, "keeping up with individual lecturers in English Literature!" Viv agreed: "you have to learn what particular lecturer likes what you do." Sally added: "Ticking certain boxes."

In English, and in most other subjects, the writing required was nearly always an academic essay, although (as suggested above) the forms of data required as evidence varied widely. There were exceptions: Carla, as discussed above, sometimes had to write essays for a specifically different audience, and Jasmine (Kympton) explained that “for Publishing I have to do business reports and stuff like that which are quite different from an essay on 20th-century literature”. Jasmine also expressed a preference for “more of a creative aspect in English”. “I find it quite sad,” she said, “that we don’t have creative writing as part of the English degree.” She experienced a creative element in Publishing, as “we have to design”. James, also at Lambton, insisted (in contradiction to Carla’s comment above) that free literary interpretation was itself creative and valued by his tutors. “I’ve done essays about poetry and delved into ideas which other people wouldn’t have, and the teacher thinks ‘I don’t quite agree with that’, but, because you’ve backed it up, it’s valid.”

Susan of Netherfield, who was taking a joint course in English and History, described essay writing in the following way:

It’s a heck of a lot of reading, and you don’t always know where to start; you have to put in enough back-up for argument and other people’s arguments but retain your own originality and avoid plagiarising. It’s a balancing act, and the reading takes the longest time I find. You can probably sit down and bash out a draft in a couple of days as long as you’ve done the reading.

Jasmine (Kympton) said that she found essay writing easier in her second year, as she was able to set her own focus. She appreciated her tutors’ giving her a broad choice of topics and allowing her to set her own essay question. “I think it’s a nice to set your own special interest and do a detailed analysis of this one thing.”

Discussing tutors’ requirements of essays, several students felt that a more uniform approach to referencing and bibliographies would be helpful. Cindy’s (Rosings) English tutors had asked students to submit a full bibliography with their essays. When she adopted this practice for Criminology, she was asked: “‘Why do you have this text in your bibliography? It’s not in your essay.’ And I got marked down for it.” Molly, at Lambton, had similarly found that, in Psychology “the references you use, you write down”, whereas in English “you have to do a bibliography of what you’ve read”. Richard, in his first year at Rosings, felt that tutors’ sensitivity to the form of bibliographies was related to their concerns about plagiarism. “The chances are that even something you’ve written will be influenced by stuff that you’ve read but haven’t actually directly referenced.” He asked for uniformity of practice in essay writing. “That’s my only complaint,” he declared. “With referencing and with certain bits of advice they give you for essay writing, let’s keep it uniform.” Rebecca (Hunsford) felt that her Philosophy tutors were more interested in the content of her essay than were her English tutors. “They don’t really knock points off [for mistakes in referencing], whereas in English they knocked so many points off because I didn’t lay it out properly on the page.”

Despite these concerns about the different expectations and requirements for writing in the different subjects, some students perceived certain generic similarities about the argumentative structure characteristic of academic writing. Alan, in his third year at Rosings, following a combined course in English

Literature and Politics, had developed a robust approach to essay work. He told me that he always structured an essay in three parts, and felt that there were not many differences between the requirements of his two subjects. “It’s not the same as doing Computing Studies or whatever.” Jasmine (Kympton) observed that the reports that she had to write in Publishing were not as different from an academic essay as they might appear. “You always take a theory and apply it to something - whether this is literary theory that I apply to a certain kind of text, or I take a theory about social behaviour and apply it to a marketing context.” These students’ essays indicated their capability at framing a thesis and developing an argument, and it may be that a more explicit study of the characteristic structures of academic writing, with regard to the specific requirements of individual subjects, would help to clear some of the uncertainties and frustrations expressed by many students in this study.

7.1 Students’ specific concerns about English

Yvonne’s view of the questionable seriousness of English (quoted above, Sections 3 and 5) may be a modality judgment (in the sense used by Hodge and Tripp [1986]) about the relation of the subject to reality. Although several students enjoyed the freedom of interpretation apparently offered by the study of English Literature, some expressed a sense that English was a closed subject, confined to its own textuality and theoretical orientations. Some students compared the orientation and approach of English tutors with those from other subjects - Politics, Journalism, Criminology - who seemed happier to engage students in discussion of contemporary issues in the world outside the academy. According to Cindy (Rosings): “In Criminology we do our presentations; we do group projects. We meet in the library. In English, there isn’t really an opportunity to do that, because it is all about what you believe about a piece of work or how you have read it. Whereas Criminology is based on facts.”

Some students described their experience of transition from pre-university English studies to university English. “At school,” said Daisy (Rosings), “we had such good discussions in English.” By contrast, Alan (Rosings) described walking into a university English class and thinking: “This is English. We are supposed to be communicative people here. It’s completely silent.” Daisy suggested that the silence sometimes arose because students were uncertain of their theoretical ground and worried about saying the wrong thing. She added: “I feel sometimes very protective over the point that I’m making, because in my head I’m thinking: ‘I am interpreting it.’” Like Sally in Hunsford, who had been “told off severely” for her opinion of a character in *Middlemarch*, she was sometimes hurt by her tutor’s reactions to her interpretation. “I might not be right, but a lot of time they’ll just say: ‘No, that’s wrong.’” Referring implicitly to the assumed interpretive freedom of English study, she said: “I didn’t really expect that in English.” She had thought that English tutors “would welcome a lot more of your interpretation, but if it is not in line with the theory it’s just no ...” Alan added: “We thought they might just develop your interpretation for you, or help you to extend it or express it.” “Some of them do,” said Daisy. “I know one in particular that’s particularly good at that. He’ll say to you: ‘OK, that’s great, but what you said about this - try thinking about it this way, look at it from this perspective.’ And that’s so helpful. But a lot of them just say: ‘No.’”

It seems that some students of English Literature (whether taking single or joint honours) are discouraged by a postmodern orientation to the subject that they do not fully understand, and which may not always be made explicit. (Snapper [2009] discusses a first year undergraduate seminar in these terms.) This seems significant, because the affective side of an educational process is at least as important to students of English Literature as it is to the students of other subjects. Daisy referred poignantly to the affective aspect of literary study: "If you have a poem about mourning or something it can be a very personal issue, so not many people want to talk." She compared the "silent" university seminar to her memory of an A Level class. "When you are at school you've known these people for so many years, you'll have everyone talk about their personal experience." Tutors' affect mattered to the students. Charlie, at Netherfield, told me that she had chosen a History module this year because she had enjoyed the tutor's approachability in the previous year: "She took the time, she was approachable, she cared."

Several students suggested that more seminars would increase students' sense of community and have a productive effect on their learning. Charlie appreciated the seminars and formative writing assignments she had experienced in her first year:

That was really useful for realising what you actually think about something, because this year we don't have seminars: we just have lectures for English and you're told what the lecturer thinks and then you go off home and think about it yourself. There's very little seeing what other people think and wondering if you think the same and that sort of thing. I think more writing and more seminars would probably help.

Susan (Netherfield) agreed: "With seminars there's far more support, far more discussion, you can find out what you think or how you communicate what you think." Richard (Rosings) described his seminar groups in favourable terms:

They get us into groups of three and we'll be looking at the text or the theory that we have been asked to read for that week. Then the tutor will get just get everybody to ... he'll go round and ask somebody to contribute and we'll always, you know, it's always a group effort. And then one of our assessments this semester for our core module in English is to give a presentation on the novel or film we'll be looking at. Again, that's a collaborative effort.

However, not all students saw seminars as a panacea. Daisy said: "I have to talk to fill the silence." The embarrassment of the silent seminar, she said, was such that: "When you walk out of the English seminar you just go. You don't want to talk to anyone because it's just so awkward."

Seminars appeared to be more generally successful in creative writing modules, where the practical work involved offered a focus for discussion. Cindy (Rosings) had "had creative writing in English for two semesters and that is very social in the sense that you join the other writers and discuss your work". Charlie (Netherfield) liked the pattern of work in her Creative Writing module. "It's a seminar every week, and you have to hand in work every week for the best of your ability - not just scribbled off like formative writing would be. I feel I'm improving every week because I'm handing things in and going to seminars. In seminars you feel more the pressure to contribute and have things to say."

Dissatisfactions with the pedagogy of English were sometimes expressed by comparison with the pedagogy of the joint subject, as in Cindy's comments (above) about the differences between her experience of English and of Criminology. Sometimes they were expressed by comparison with the imagined experience of scientists, engineers or medics, who were assumed to have far more contact time than students of English. Viv (Netherfield) said: "I live with people who do sciences, medical and everything, and they've got nine to five every day, and I'm just sat around at home doing a bit of reading!" No matter how valid this comment may be (as Susan pointed out to Viv, she could go and work from nine to five in the library), it is clear that many students come to University with a sense of English as a communicative subject that allows for affect, interpretation and creativity. They find difficulty in apprehending apparently different aspects of the epistemology and purpose of the subject at University level.



8. Joint honours students' choice of dissertation topics

The students in the second and third year of their course were either planning, or had already started, their final year dissertation. Where the students felt more identified with one subject than with the other (please see section 3 above), they usually chose to write a dissertation in that subject. Carla (Lambton) had not yet chosen whether to write her dissertation in English Literature or Film Studies, "but whichever subject I do choose that will be the subject I felt closer to." Some students who identified equally with both subjects, such as Estelle (Rosings), said they would like, if possible, "to do a dissertation on both sides". "It's a lot of work," she said, "but it's a part of what you do." Daisy (Rosings) agreed: "I'd definitely get a higher sense of satisfaction and pride in my work knowing that I'd managed to do both."

Glenys (Kympton) had not found many synergies or connections between English and Music, and had not yet decided in which subject to write a dissertation. She would rather produce a portfolio of compositions than write a lengthy assignment, but, if approaching a written dissertation, "I'd rather do something to do with English than about Music." She wasn't going to attempt a combined dissertation because that felt "risky".

Some students felt required to write their dissertation in a particular subject for vocational reasons. Molly (Lambton) would write a dissertation in Psychology because she understood that this was a requirement of the British Psychological Society in order to gain graduate status. Richard (Rosings) was only in his first year at the time of the focus group, but anticipated a similar requirement.

Where there was no vocational or other strong reason for choosing another discipline to write their dissertation, students more frequently chose English. Alan (Rosings) found that the structure of the English course allowed more time to write during the second half of the year. Miranda (Hunsford), whose joint studies were in English Literature and Journalism, had chosen to write her dissertation in English "because I see English as my academic show off subject". Pauline, also at Hunsford, had chosen the English offer because of its flexibility: she had the opportunity to write a 10,000 word piece of creative writing with attached commentary. Meg (Hunsford) had chosen a dissertation in English in which she would be able to incorporate some of her Philosophy studies. "I couldn't really draw the English into the Philosophy," she said, "but I can draw the Philosophy into the English." Yvonne (Netherfield), however, had chosen to write her dissertation in Philosophy. Although, she said, "in some ways I enjoy English more," Philosophy seemed to her the "more academically serious" subject.

Some students had been able to write a dissertation that drew upon both of their joint studies. Felicity (Netherfield), who was studying Cultural Studies and English Literature, had chosen to write a dissertation on costuming Hamlet across the ages. "I've done a lot of close analysis of Shakespearean texts," she said, "but also I am analysing dress codes and things like that, so it is a bit of a crossover." Jasmine (Kympton) had chosen to write a combined dissertation in Publishing and English on children's literature in the First World War. "This works together quite nicely," she said:

Because I can look at the actual content of the book - the texts, and the ideology and everything - from an English Literature perspective and use literary theory and criticism towards an understanding of the texts. And on the other hand I can see the broader picture of the publishing industry around it. I can see the sociological side in terms of book History, or how the publisher in the end influenced the publication of the book, and how that in turn influenced the content of the book as well. I think that works together quite nicely.

Jasmine's account seems to fulfil Felicity's (Netherfield) account of an ideal joint honours dissertation. "It will be a lot nicer," said Felicity, "if it could cross across both, because if you're doing a degree that incorporates two subjects, it would be nice to have a dissertation, one piece of work, that embodies that as well."

9. The effect of joint honours study on career aspirations

Most of the students interviewed expressed a mixture of flexibility, ambition and caution in their career aspirations. In many cases they said that joint honours study offered them a wider potential choice of career; at the same time, their choice of subjects often included a “safer”, more “solid” option that gave them confidence that they would find appropriate employment in the future.

Several students were travelling hopefully with no clear sense of where they would eventually arrive. Viv (Netherfield) told me: “I never really knew what I wanted to do.” Having enjoyed English Language and English Literature as A Level subjects, she had combined them at University, which offered her a breathing space: “It’s a few more years before I have to work. I think as long as I keep doing what I enjoy and what stimulates me, then I’ll end up in a job that I enjoy.” Susan (Netherfield), who was studying English Literature and History, said: “The good thing with a humanities degree is that you can do quite a lot with it ... you could go into publishing, into law, into marketing.” She thought she would “muddle through”: “You can’t worry too much because you honestly have no idea what’s coming.” Pauline, at Hunsford, saw a joint honours course as “like an extension of education rather than [a vocational preparation]”. She thought her course broadened her education after A Levels, which were “narrowing”. She had found that “a lot of people who don’t know what they want to do are in joint honours, because they have lots of interests”. Rebecca, at Hunsford, enjoyed Philosophy but had also taken English Literature because, she thought, it would appear “solid” and give her “a broader scope of job prospects”.

Several other students’ choices of joint honours subjects were related to relatively indefinite ideas of their future lives and employment. Miranda, also at Hunsford, had a vocational interest in Journalism (which she studied alongside English), but thought that “most of the time, people end up doing something different from what they think they will be able to do”. Cindy, at Rosings, was due to graduate about six months after the interview. At the moment, she said, she “hadn’t got a clue” what she was going to do after University, but she was “very happy, because when I look at jobs, I can look at jobs that are to do with English (that’s one entire path that way) and Criminology (which is in the exact opposite direction).” Given these choices, she said: “My horizon is so big that I’m confused! I can do almost anything! But I’m definitely glad that I do have those two options.” Carla, at Lambton, had always known that “because of my physical disabilities, there are limitations as to what I’m able to do”. She had chosen “quite academic paths as opposed to practical, because obviously that’s something I can access with ease and on an equal playing field”. Taking joint honours had given her “a lot more diversity in terms of options”. She wasn’t entirely sure whether she would take “a media route or a teaching route”, and she would take wider social factors into account. “It’s going to be a case of waiting to see where we are economically when I finish my degree as to where I progress next.”

Some students had chosen their joint honours subjects with firmer ideas about their future lives, but maintained a flexible attitude. Molly (Lambton), who was reading English Literature and Psychology, said: “When I chose my subjects, I was quite methodical and logical about keeping my options open.” She enjoyed English Literature, which she thought she might want to teach at some point, but she “wanted to keep my options open for different careers”. Her “ultimate goal” was “to do forensic psychology with the police”, but, she said, “You change your mind, and, as you grow up, you get into new subjects and you differ in what you want to do.” Glenys, at Kympton, told me: “One week I want to pursue music, and the next I think something different.” Everyone on her course taking single Honours Music had, she said, a dream of being a musician. But, she declared: “We’re not all going to end up in the music industry or as a film composer.” English Literature, she thought, was a “safe” study that kept her options open. James, also at Kympton, agreed. “You need to have something practical, a real backup. Having an English degree is something really solid for most jobs.” Glenys chimed in: “It keeps us grounded.”

A much smaller number of students could say, with Jasmine (Kympton): “I knew exactly what I wanted to do before I came to University.” Picking up Glenys’ term “grounded”, she added: “Publishing is the thing that keeps me to the ground, actually, because I want to go into the publishing industry.” She wanted to be an editor, and felt that she had an “incredibly big advantage” over single Honours students of English Literature who ventured into publishing. But, she felt, she might change her mind and “want to do something completely different”. In this case, she thought: “I still have the option to say I actually have done this degree as well. So I can do something completely different with it. That’s what I think is really great about joint honours.”

Richard, of Rosings, who was in his first year, had chosen Psychology because, he said: “If you get accredited there’s always something to fall back on.” However, he did not seem very confident about working as a psychologist. He “definitely couldn’t pick a career in psychology - I wouldn’t know which one, there are so many”. He hoped that none of the other students felt as he did: “It’s not nice not knowing what you’re going to do when you’re finished.”

At least two students’ ideas of their future life and career had changed radically since starting University. Charlie (Netherfield) had come to University “wanting to do French ... for the rest of my life”. She soon realised that she had made “a stupid choice”. The flexibility of the course structure at Netherfield had enabled her to change her subjects to English Literature and Italian. If she had been studying somewhere else, she said, and “had been stuck doing French, it would have been awful”. Alan, at Rosings, had arrived at University thinking he was going to be a journalist and writer. Because of his joint course, he had become more interested in politics. Although he still loved English, his dislike of dogmatic interpretations - “other people telling me that something means this” - had made him decide to take a master’s degree in Politics.

10. How might joint honours students be better supported?

Where both subjects were taught by tutors who belonged to the same or related departments, students were usually satisfied with both the academic and personal support they gained. Felicity, in Netherfield, who was taking English Literature and Cultural Studies, expressed her content. "Because both [subjects] are run by the same school and have similar lecturers, I think they run very well together, and I don't find it difficult balancing the two." According to Carey, who was also taking English Literature and Cultural Studies at Netherfield: "You get a lot more personal support because of the small lecture groups. You get to know the people on your course and you get to know the lecturers far better than you would if you were just doing English."

There was some feeling that all students could be better informed from an early stage about the nature and requirements of joint honours study. Charlie, who was taking English Literature with Italian at Netherfield, had not initially chosen a joint course. She had been told that "a joint honours course was harder to get into and that she would essentially be doing a degree and a half". This seemed a "terrifying" prospect. "So I didn't even consider doing joint honours until I got here and was given the opportunity to do three subjects in my first year." Jasmine (Kympton) suggested that students should be clearly informed in the first year which modules were compulsory in order to fulfil course requirements for future years. James (also of Kympton) said that he found it "quite worrying" that he could "hinder my degree by not doing something this year which I should have done to get into something next year".

Several students suggested that (in Sandra's [Rosings] words) "different subjects should talk to each other before setting deadlines". She had found that deadlines for English Literature and History often clashed: "So, more often than not, you're doing two, an English essay and a History essay, in the space of a couple of days." However, several students felt that the tutors from their schools had never spoken to each other, and might not (as Estelle of Rosings put it) know the location of each other's buildings.

Where students complained of a lack of support, this was not necessarily related to their joint honours status. In the words of Susan (Netherfield): "The one thing I would want is ... more contact time, more availability of the tutors for them to know vaguely who you are. Otherwise you just feel like a statistic." She and Charlie asked specifically for more seminars, as opposed to large-audience lectures. "I think," said Charlie, "that seminars are absolutely essential. I found it a bit ridiculous that [in English] there weren't seminars and you've got five hours sitting in a room full of other students." "Being talked at," added Susan. Viv commented that, when consulting her tutor during the latter's office hour, she disliked feeling that she had to "ask my questions quickly because someone's waiting outside". Students sometimes related the service they received to the amount they paid. Susan said ironically: "Yeah, we'll take three and a half grand for the course, thanks. [Tutors should be] accessible and amenable. Twenty minutes of their time is not too much to ask."

The issue of fees arose again when Molly, of Lambton, said that at her University each student had only one academic review tutor. Hers was in Psychology, and so she felt "disadvantaged in English". She added:

Our key tutors tend to disintegrate over the three years. You see them less and less to the point where I emailed mine the other week and he said: 'Well, you're a third year student. You're supposed to be doing it on your own.' I was quite taken aback. I thought: 'Hang on a minute. I pay over three grand a year. I don't expect to be left on my own to do the work!'

Carla, of Lambton, thought that students would feel more supported if they had "regular meetings ... maybe monthly or so, with somebody from each faculty just to say how they felt you were going. So you could voice your concerns or anything you were finding difficult and try and make both parties aware of the situation".

A frequently expressed view was simply that lecturers and tutors should, as Jasmine (Kympton) put it, "be aware that there are a lot of Joint Honours students," and that they can't necessarily "expect the same input from Joint Honours students as from Single Honours". Molly (Lambton) asked especially for more understanding and support "when it comes to writing essays". "I'm not sure," she said, "that each faculty, each department, really understands what it's like to write another essay in a different style ... It's not ... easy to switch styles and reference systems." More generally, she commented: "I don't necessarily think the lecturers understand how much work we have to put in, to do our essays and to keep track of our work in both subjects."

11. Students' advice to those considering a joint honours degree

Nearly all the students felt positively about their joint honours studies, and would recommend these as more interesting and engaging than single honours work. Belinda (Netherfield) said that, unless a prospective student had a very specific English-related career path planned, he or she should consider joint honours English. "You enjoy each subject a lot more. It gives you a new appreciation of the subjects because you're comparing them - it's just a lot more interesting." "There's just a lot more scope," said Yvonne (Netherfield), "and you learn a lot more." Jasmine (Kympton) said that several of her friends who were taking single honours English were jealous of her. They had taken a module from another subject (such as Drama) in the first year and now wished they had taken English as part of a joint honours degree. Molly (Lambton) felt that joint honours study had "opened different paths to me that I wouldn't have had as a single honours student." She thought it had done "amazing things" for her personal development: "thinking critically, developing my thinking style into a more adult pattern."

Apart from its intrinsic value, joint honours study would, many students felt, make them more employable. Several of them had combined an more adventurous choice of subject (in employment terms) with a "safer" choice: they could offer a range of competencies while feeling reasonably confident that they would, if necessary, find employment related to their safer subject (Section 2 above). Only Adam (Hunsford) had a caveat in this regard. Although joint honours study theoretically enabled him to "keep [his] options a lot wider", an Educational Studies tutor had warned him that his joint honours status would hinder his application to take a PGCE course as a secondary teacher of English.

Enjoyable and stimulating though the work often was, most students agreed that managing their time was sometimes difficult. Belinda (Netherfield) pointed out that, if she got stuck on the work for one subject, she could move on to the other subject and then go back to her original study. However, many students felt that a joint honours course was (in Molly's view) "not an easy route". "If you're embarking on a joint honours course," she said, "you have to be focused, you have to be determined, to meet the criteria of what you want to do and the criteria of the marking as well." Cindy (Rosings) recommended prospective joint honours students to buy a diary. Daisy (Rosings) agreed. She studied two subjects and played for two sports teams. "I still go out three or four nights a week, and if you manage your time you can fit it all in, and still do good work to a high standard, but you've got to have a decent diary!" Estelle (Rosings) declared that, despite the amount of work involved ("I feel like I'm doing two degrees sometimes"), her course was "fun, and [she] wouldn't change it".

Sandra (Rosings) recommended a prospective joint honours student to select their place of education carefully. If possible, they should choose a University where a joint honours courses were common and generally recognised. "It does help," she said, "when everyone is in the same boat." Alan (Rosings) agreed, and recommended prospective students to "have fun". University, he said, should be a place where "you get to develop your own interests".

12. Conclusion: implications for higher education

A fifth of undergraduate students of English are enrolled on joint honours courses: the numbers are greater if we include those taking combinations that include such related subjects as English Language and Creative Writing. This is a large constituency whose presence and needs may currently not be fully recognised (Section 6 above). Moreover, their experience throws up certain aspects of the general experience of undergraduates in English (and, one might argue, other humanities and social sciences) that might profitably be addressed by lecturers, programme designers and university senior management.

Students of English embark on joint honours courses for a number of reasons that can be broadly defined (Section 2 above) in terms of contingency, academic pleasure and vocational preparation. Many of them identify themselves fully as joint honours students, equally committed to both their subjects, but some find difficulty in justifying their choice of study programme within a public discourse that misunderstands and sometimes denigrates joint honours study (Section 3). Nonetheless, many joint honours students relish the variety and challenge of their university experience, and regard themselves as potentially more employable than single honours graduates. They especially enjoy and benefit from the conceptual range and understanding and multiple skill-sets that they gain from their joint studies (Section 4).

Practical problems related to the scheduling of modular courses affected a number of the students (Section 5). Several had found that the requirement to follow certain modules in one of their subjects had reduced their module choice in their other subject. This was especially the case when "double" modules were scheduled. There were also some instances where timetabling required students to attend lectures for several hours in succession, or to make difficult journeys between campuses. Assignment due dates sometimes clashed. Generally, joint honours students might take longer than their single honours contemporaries to establish a sense of belonging and relatedness to the campus.

However, the students expected that some problems would arise in a joint honours programme: they realised that the university, as Molly (Lambton) put it, "can't ensure that all [subject deadlines] are spread out". They were more concerned about less tangible issues that might be addressed as general policy across the institution. When Sandra (Rosings) advised (Section 11) future joint honours students to choose a University where a joint honours courses were common and generally recognised, she was asking for an overall institutional awareness of the nature and needs of joint honours study. This should include both an understanding of the everyday experience of joint honours students and an awareness of the epistemological challenges of undergraduate study. This approach, it will be argued, would benefit single honours students as well.

Lea and Street (1998:172) argue that joint honours students are particularly challenged by the need to switch between "linguistic practices, social meanings and identities". They suggest that the key differences in the kind of writing required by different academic disciplines are epistemological: they are "defined through implicit assumptions about what constitutes valid

knowledge within a particular context, and the relationships of authority that exist around the communication of these assumptions" (1998: 170). To illustrate this, Lea and Street give an example of a student taking a joint honours course in History and Anthropology. He had received positive feedback for his History essay, but his Anthropology tutor had been highly critical of his "lack" of "structure and argument" in the Anthropology essay. The student, however, could not understand how the essay lacked structure and felt that he had presented a coherent argument in his writing. "What may be at stake," comment Lea and Street (1998: 166), is determination of what is involved in a particular discipline:

The tutor in this case may see anthropology as requiring different conceptions of knowledge ... than did the history tutor, for whom clear summary of the facts in appropriate sequence was sufficient evidence of a "carefully argued and relevant essay".

The present study provides further evidence (Section 7 above) of ways in which joint honours students have to negotiate a variety of differing tutor expectations and subject epistemologies. The students found that the nature of evidence and the approach to interpretation differed between subjects, and that they had to be aware of differing requirements when writing essays for assessment. Tutor and subject expectations most clearly varied with respect to conventions of referencing and bibliography, but less obvious differences challenged students' understanding more deeply. This evidence supports the view that writing an essay in an appropriate manner involves an awareness of the epistemology of the subject and of the professional discourses surrounding it.

For this reason, joint honours students would benefit if their tutors clearly recognised – and communicated their recognition of – not only the presence of joint honours students, but also the epistemology of the subject they are teaching, and its similarities to and differences from related subjects. Given the extent to which the philosophy of cultural studies has imbued the humanities and social sciences, a more explicit acknowledgement of approaches and concepts would be enormously helpful to a wide range of students – single as well as joint honours (Hodgson and Harris 2012). Lillis (2003: 194) describes the inherent inequalities of a system where what is "right" is implicit rather than "explicit", assumed rather than taught. As Snapper (2009: 202) suggests (with reference to English studies), an explanatory focus in the first year on the underlying philosophy of the subject would help students make the changes in their mind-set necessary to understand the discipline in which they are engaged.

Several students in this study asked for further seminar time, but others felt that this alone would not bridge the gap in understanding they experienced between themselves and their tutor (Section 7). Several studies (e.g. Lea and Street 1998; Lillis 2003; Hodgson 2010) suggest that the mutual understanding required might be facilitated by a change in the writing culture of the academy. Lillis (2003: 193) explores the "monologic nature of the academic writing that is required from students and the pedagogy in which it is embedded" and calls for "dialogue

rather than monologue or dialectic to be at the centre of an academic literacies stance". As suggested in Section 7 above, tutors could profitably explore with students the characteristic structures of academic writing, with regard to the specific requirements of individual subjects. A focus on writing as a means of learning rather than of assessment, involving an emphasis on low-stakes, collaborative, formative writing, might help students to construct the knowledge required by each subject. That is a question for a further study.



13. Appendices

13.1 Joint Honours Study: Focus Group Schedule

1. Previous education experience and reasons for choice of joint honours.
2. How do students identify themselves (e.g. with one department or as 'joint-honours')?
3. Perceived dis/advantages of being a joint-honours student.
4. Practicalities of being a joint-honours student (timetabling, coursework deadlines etc).
5. Apparent levels of awareness of academic staff of their joint-honours status.
6. Synergies/connections between subjects of study.
7. How students cope with different expectations and requirements (e.g. in writing styles) and different teaching styles. Discussion of essays they have sent in advance or brought with them.
8. How joint-honours students could be better supported.
9. Has their experience as a joint-honours student affected their career aspirations?
10. Effect on choice of dissertation topics.
11. What advice would students give to someone considering a joint-honours course?

13.2 Extract from transcript: Lambton University

JH: Traditionally there seems to me to be quite a big difference between the arts based course of English Literature on the one hand and the scientific psychology course. What is it like for you to be doing those two subjects together?

Molly: Sometimes I really enjoy it because it gives me a variety of writing styles, and I get a break from the scientific rigour of psychology and can just be free to express my ideas in English, but sometimes it's really difficult if I've got two assignments to do around the same time. Having to switch that mind set. Also on days when I've got English and Psychology lectures, again it's hard to switch that style of thinking, because I think English Literature encourages you to go to the text and then develop your own ideas, but stick rigidly to the texts that you are looking at. Whereas in Psychology the onus is on you to look for other literature to support your references, other research papers to support your ideas. I mean you can't just - with Psychology - you can't just put forward a point without backing it up with previous research reports. Whereas English they encourage you very much to develop your own ideas from the texts instead of using the text to develop your own ideas.

Carla: With the amalgamation of Film and English ... as you say it's two very different styles, but English and Film are both asking you for your own development of texts whether it be Film or Literature. They're asking you for your own opinions and to marry that with other reports so in that respect they're very similar. So I don't have to alter my way of thinking. I can still develop my own thoughts on whatever the texts may be whether that's Film or Literature. That's probably where they work well for me, to be able to do that.

JH: Do you see yourselves as primarily an English student, or a Psychology student, or a Film student, or do you see yourself as a kind of joint person?

Carla: It's very hard to kind of... I've been considering that very question myself because in our faculty, I not sure if it was this way for you, but with the dissertation we have to decide to either do the dissertation in one subject or the other and it's difficult. I haven't quite come to a conclusion fully, as to which way I'm going to go, and it would be hard to say whether if I did choose to do my dissertation in English of Film - well it will be one or the other - but which ever subject I do choose to do my dissertation in it's hard to know whether that's because that's the subject I felt closer to ... So it's a really difficult one. I don't think I can say I'm connected more with one that I can with the other, but at the same time I'm not equally torn either. It is a very difficult one.

Molly: For me, I didn't have a choice on what dissertation I had to take. I had to take Psychology because of the British Psychological Society, it's accredited, and they say in order to get that graduate status you have to do the dissertation in Psychology. Likewise on a lot of my modules I don't get a choice. I only get to choose a limited number of English modules so for me because of the BPS I'm probably more of a Psychology, and that's the way - and also I'm hoping to apply for my Master's here in Forensic Psychology. Having said that, if I went into teaching I would probably prefer to teach English than I would Psychology, but at the university I would say definitely my main side of things is Psychology.

JH: To talk on a really practical level. Are there problems that arise in terms of timetabling or actual practicalities of being a joint student?

Molly: This year definitely. Obviously timetable-wise it's hard to get all students doing one lecture a day or two something like that, and this year on a Tuesday I have a four hour slot where I go straight from English lecture to a Psychology lecture and they are mostly two hours, so for me definitely I find it a struggle on a Tuesday to keep my concentration up for those four hours, and again to switch in the middle of it. It's right over lunch as well so I don't get anything to eat, to break it up or anything. I find for timetabling definitely I would say that's a problem, and sometimes on occasions I've had two assignments due the same day for English and Psychology, because each subject only makes sure that they haven't got modules due on the same day; but obviously across the board they can't ensure that all subjects are spread out, so again that's been a problem, over my degree.

Carla : Well, a lot of similarities there. Even to the point I have certain core modules that you have to take, I'm not sure if that's the same with you?

Molly: Yes.

Carla: They're kind of chosen and set for you and because of that your options are very limited, there are some aspects of the course that I would have liked to have taken that I wasn't able to because there were clashes between the two subjects, which is unfortunate, but due to the nature of the course it has to work that way. I actually had to change some of my modules at the very beginning of the year because I was going to go straight

from a two and a half hour film lecture to a two and a half hour English lecture and because I have to get across there on the bus it wasn't going to work, so unfortunately I had to rearrange that, but they have been very understanding and very supportive in helping me rearrange and adjust my timetable if that has been necessary. It can be very, very stressful at times having to juggle the two.

JH: Are there any real advantages, do you think?

Carla: I would definitely say there are advantages of it from a perspective that both campuses have a very different feel to them and although that's not academic, I do feel that affects your studies and it does get you into the right mindset. When you're here I really do feel it's easier to adjust because the campuses are so diverse and so focused on either art or education kind of basis. It helps you to adjust and I do feel you get a broader sense of the campus and the university as a whole, and a broader sense from an educational perspective, you do feel that you're not being bogged down on the subject as such. You've got a broad variety that keeps things very fresh and that gives you the enthusiasm to continue really. I know this sounds very crass but I find it incredibly exciting when I do see the parallels between the two subjects. I feel it reinforces my understanding of both, really, you know to do the two.

Molly: Yeah, similar to Carla. I'm obviously based on this campus all the time so I don't really get that difference in campuses, but definitely from a crossover point of view. Even though they are very different subjects, English and Psychology do cross over, for example my dissertation in Psychology I'm doing discourse analysis and I know that next semester I'm studying that in one of my English modules. Also there are things like in English module we are doing at the moment on literary theory, obviously things like psychoanalysis and things come up in that which crosses over with psychology. So I find that Psychology definitely helps my understanding of English in terms of that. Although I think English has helped me build my confidence up in actually going forward and saying this is what I think, because obviously in Psychology, like I said, you have to base it on other's people's research. You don't get that confidence up of actually saying: Well this is what I think and this is where it comes from.

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