

Diversifying Assessment

Reviews, reading dossiers, assessing
students in seminars

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Reviews, reading dossiers, assessing students in seminars

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Project mission statement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- assessment enhances the process of student learning
- the purpose of assessment is clearly understood by students
- effective feedback is an essential part of the assessment and learning process
- assessment methods arise out of the specific learning objectives of the discipline
- thinking about assessment contributes to good teaching practice
- a well-balanced programme of assessment comprises a combination of the traditional and the innovative, the formative and the summative
- assessment processes are equitable and transparent, and encourage active involvement on the part of learners.

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

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

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

Introduction

The English subject division at the University of Northumbria is one of a number of teaching divisions contributing modules to a diverse range of programmes. Its single honours students often take modules in History, and can opt to study creative writing, film, art history, women's studies, linguistics, aspects of popular culture and American literature. Many of the works students study for these newer units are non-canonical. This reinforces the subject division's preoccupation with the ongoing issue of how such material should be studied and its relationship to 'Literature'. An overarching aim of the division is not to instruct students in how to interpret literature, but to introduce them to a range of theoretical approaches which allow them to evaluate writing in their own terms.

Our mixture of traditional and new curricula content, combined with the special prominence we give to teaching through the group seminar, has proved highly successful. The division received an excellent from the Teaching Quality Assessment exercise conducted during 1994/5.

Subject reviewers praised the use of the group seminar (maximum thirty students) as the principal teaching method in the subject division. They found it particularly suited to the University and department's aim to promote student centred learning. At the same time, staff were encouraged to be more innovative with assessment practices, particularly on newer and more modern units.

Our determination to diversify assessment to improve student learning in our 'newer' units resulted in the development and introduction of three innovative assessment practices:

- Review writing
- Reading dossier
- Assessing students in seminars

Each practice replaces or supplements a conventional summative assessment by essay or examination. The principle of using assessment formatively allows us to provide early feedback to students on core skills required for weightier summative assessments. Each assessment also fosters the value of collaborative learning for completing independent assessment. A further aim has been to develop a broader range of transferable skills than was the case previously, particularly the ability to communicate informed and researched opinion in a variety of formats.

By using these innovations at levels one and two we were able to streamline assessment for 'newer' units, making progression within and between units clearer.

As head of subject division, I wanted evidence that the changes we made were not just cosmetic, but did strengthen the match between learning outcomes and assessment. I also wanted to review student progression across units in order to sample their experience of learning and assessment across units and routes.

As director of the Assessment and the *Expanded* Text project, I wanted to continue to complement and support the work of another FDTL (Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning) project which had also been piloted in the department. PADSHE (Personal and Academic Development for Students in Higher Education) provides students with a file where, with the help of a tutor, they record academic achievement and lifelong learning skills. We felt that by diversifying assessment and making the variety of skills available from the degree more explicit to students, they would be better able to identify progress for these files.

These assessments have been tried and tested at the University of Northumbria. They can be used in a number of different ways and can be adapted to suit the specific requirements of particular institutions and courses.

'You're exposed to different kinds of literature you wouldn't necessarily read, but then the background stuff helps too, I mean, at first I hated Progress and Modernism so much, I thought, "what on earth is the point of doing this? If I had wanted to do a History degree I would have done one!" Now I can see it's relevant.'

'You couldn't write about Virginia Woolf if you didn't understand feminism ... or if you didn't understand about stream of consciousness or something. Your ordinary punter, reading Virginia Woolf, just wouldn't have a clue. I mean we didn't have a clue when we read it!'

Review writing

Description of initiative

A large, first year foundation module, 'Texts and issues', which has an intake of 150 students, invites students to reflect upon materials that are normally presented as 'Literature' and to consider how such material can be interpreted.

Previously, students handed in two essay assignments, one at the end of each semester. This led to a very large amount of marking and staff found it difficult to provide regular feedback to students.

Below is an extract from a typical student essay. The extract is taken from a response to the question, 'Explore the ways in which feminist criticism has explored the notion of identity.' The extract illustrates common problems in the discursive writing students were producing for this unit. These included a reluctance to identify and interpret key terms, letting quotations stand for analysis and a reluctance to give more than an overview of the theories they were discussing.

Feminist criticism developed as a discipline in the 1960s. After two hundred years of struggling for women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft was one of these women who battled for equality between the sexes. Wollstonecraft published her critique of society in *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. Her work helped raise awareness of women and their social roles and she set the wheels of change in motion.

... There are many different types of feminist criticism, such as, radical, marxist, liberal, post-structuralist, deconstructive, essentialist. These different perspectives lead to debates between feminists, but they all share one common starting point, and that is that women are subordinate in a patriarchal society.

I am going to look at the different perspectives put forward by feminist criticism and how they help create a notion of identity. To do this successfully, a thorough analysis is needed of the different and contradictory viewpoints. Many feminist critics have explored this subject in an attempt to find answers to the subordination women have suffered. There are two main schools of thought that feminist critics ascribe to: Anglo-American and French feminism.

Anglo-American feminist critics were concerned with the idea that women writers had been excluded from literary history. They wanted to rediscover the lost work of women writers, whilst providing a context for female writers to explain their experiences of what it is to be a woman, experiences that have been silenced: the aim was to fit women into the male dominated tradition; they also wanted to write a tradition amongst themselves. Elaine Showalter refers to the female tradition as 'the lost continent ... (which) has risen like Atlantis from the sea of English Literature...'

We found it advantageous to replace one of the required essays with a formative review for the following reasons. The new practice helps students both to engage more actively with the criticism and theory they are reading, and also to question the authority of the views of published critics like Elaine Showalter and Jonathan Culler more readily. Students begin to identify unstated propositions and limitations in ideas. They develop an independent perspective.

Previously, students had not been assessed until Christmas. In the new assessment design, students complete a review in week three and at Christmas. Consequently, feedback and dialogue between student and tutor about the purpose and function of the unit and course has improved. Students see clear benefit from identifying and rehearsing skills which they are expected to use later for their summative assessment, an essay. At the same time, improving the timing and spacing of assessments counters the feelings of isolation and alienation from the tenets of the 'newer' curriculum units, feelings which had been frequently expressed in interviews with students.

Ways of using review writing

Because we wanted to foster the value of collaborative learning, we decided to ask our students to complete the preparatory work for the assessment in their seminar groups in addition to our allocating seminar time for the completion of the first review itself. This meant that everyone was familiar with the criteria for the review and aware of how other students interpreted and fulfilled these criteria.

Using an assessment formatively, like review writing, also provides opportunities for tutors to 'mark' work for feedback rather than grading purposes. This can open up a whole new channel of communication between tutor and student. This is particularly useful if, like many tutors, your programme of lectures and/or seminars is not supported by tutorial feedback.

Preparatory reading group

The preparatory reading group session we devised for week two enables students to practise marking up secondary texts for group discussion. We had quite distinct aims for the reading group which were as follows:

- To provide students with a means of evaluating theoretical approaches.
- To focus their insight into how critics shape their answers to critical questions.
- To improve collaborative learning.
- To provide the students with the confidence to write the review.

Exercise 1

Preparation: Read the second chapter of *Literary Theory: a very short introduction* (Culler: 1997). As you read, write down an issue, idea or concept which you:

- did understand as a result of reading it
- did not understand, or would like to know more about.

Exercise 2

Divide into small groups (of four or five). Start by discussing shared problems or particular interests arising from the chapter. To arrive at a detailed understanding of Culler and provide a focus for discussion:

- Highlight an area of the text where Culler uses summary. What do you think summary is being used for?
- Highlight an area of the text where Culler uses quotations from critics. Why do you think he quotes?
- Highlight the author's line of argument - his thesis in answer to the question 'what is literature? Do you think Culler thinks some of the arguments he refers to are stronger than others?

- Examine how Culler clarifies difficult points to himself and to those he is writing for.
- Examine how Culler uses evidence to support his claims.

Write a brief summary of Culler's article and select one quotation from the essay which you think best represents his argument (no more than fifty words).

The session has three distinct, but related activities. First the students are asked to be honest about their experience of reading theory. This generates discussion in small groups. The second exercise moves them away from personal experience back towards a central learning outcome of the course and their ability to 'evaluate' theoretical approaches. They are asked to 'handle' the theoretical text. This enables the students to be more informed readers. Thirdly, they are asked to represent an argument in writing, by selecting something positive from their reading. This practice of putting an 'authority' into their own words gives them confidence.

Writing a review

The review writing assessment which follows in week four builds on the learning promoted by the preparatory reading group. Our version of review writing provides students with a model for taking notes and evaluating the quality and usefulness of secondary sources. Because we decided to make the review a formative rather than summative exercise, the focus of the new practice is on:

- actively involving students in practising analytical and evaluative skills which were integral to the learning promoted by the subject division
- helping staff provide timely feedback
- emphasising the point that summative assessments are the result of progressive and active learning processes
- strengthening the links between the learning going on in seminars and the skills required to do well in assessment.

Exercise 1

Preparation: Read *Literary Theory: a very short introduction* (Culler: 1997) and the guidelines for writing a review.

In groups discuss the following:

- what the book is about
- who the book is for and how well it addresses its audience
- what you liked/disliked about it
- what the key features of a good review are.

Exercise 2

In groups, compile a 500 word review based on all the first drafts of the group. The group needs to decide on:

- an introductory opening paragraph
- a major issue or two
- supporting evidence
- any references to particular parts of the book
- a suitable summary.

Exercise 3

Read the guidelines on writing a review and write your own review of Jonathan Culler's book.

Guidelines and advice for writing a review

A reviewer normally assumes that the reader is not familiar with the book. Thus, the first paragraph usually provides a helpful introduction. Inevitably, some retelling of the book is necessary, but the review will chiefly be concerned with describing (what the book is about), analysing (thinking about the arguments and debates which the book addresses in order to understand what the book is about) and especially with evaluating (deciding whether the book does what it sets out to do and how well it does so).

Draft your review as soon as possible, while the book is still fresh in your mind. If you cannot do this, at least jot down some notes about your responses as a student to an introduction for students: the things you liked or thought he explained well; the layout of the book; things you do not understand; things you do understand.

If possible read the book again.

In your first draft, do not worry about limitations of space. Write as long a review as you can, putting down everything that comes to mind. You can cut it to the required length – retaining only the chief points and the necessary supporting details – later. In your first draft, try to produce a fairly full account of the book and your response to it, so that later you will not have to trust a fading memory for details.

NB. Reviewing books is also a good way of keeping a concise record of books you have read and your opinions of them. You could keep a file of such reviews of books (fictional and critical) which you have read on other courses. You could refer to these later when you come to write an essay. The advantage of this is that you already have an argument in embryo.

The review requires the student to collaborate, reflect, describe, analyse, evaluate and form an independent opinion. It is this which makes our version of review writing an example of active learning. Equally, it makes explicit for the student the diversity of approaches to literature available and their role in evaluating these approaches. The match between one of the 'newer' unit's major learning outcomes – 'you will be able to evaluate in your own terms' – group work and the assessment practice used is made more explicit.

Writing a review for the second time

To encourage wider reading of theoretical approaches to literature we asked our students to complete a second review for this unit. This review was completed independently, without the collaboration of peers, although time was set aside in one seminar for preparation and discussion with the tutors. Reading for the course had gradually increased in length and difficulty as the unit progressed. Students are encouraged to review theoretical approaches to texts they are studying elsewhere in the first year, in order to make connections across courses of study. A popular choice has been 'Jane Austen and the Gentry: A Study in Literature and Ideology' (Lovell, 1978).

Impact on students

Students reported on the changes we made to our assessment practices in the following terms.

Preparatory reading group

Whilst last year's students had felt lost in seminars...

'A lot of the terminology is above my head. Subject matter did not grip me in any way.'

'At school you're all in a class, and you're not lectured at, so you're used to sharing your opinions and that about a book. But here you've only really got about one hour seminar and you're covering so much, it's hard to get your own opinion.'

...this year's felt much more confident. Particularly effective were the changes we had made to the purpose and function of group work:

'It was best when we went over things in seminars.'

'The group discussion before class discussion was very effective: we tried to solve problems for ourselves.'

'I enjoyed the seminars most. I read over the articles and then asked about anything I didn't understand in the seminar.'

'Group discussions were very good, helping me to understand the more difficult points [in my reading]. Because everyone can get involved and listen to other people's opinions.'

'The group discussions helped increase my understanding.'

'[It was useful when we were] asked to present our interpretations of an essay giving examples from personal reading. Although I don't enjoy talking to a large group it made me understand the essay [theoretical reading set] very well.'

'As this was the first time I had ever studied theory I thought it was a good idea to have group discussion every seminar.'

This year's students appeared more assured readers, equipped with strategies to engage with the material. When asked what advice they would give a first year student about to take the module, they were ready with suggested approaches and methodologies:

'Read articles several times and look up difficult terms first.'

'[You should] read texts before seminars, discuss them and ask questions, then read again.'

Read all the essays and Culler. Try to ask questions or write down points you don't understand.'

The review

We found evidence that the review helped students to develop an early understanding of the processes of selection, focus, summary and recognition of argument which students last year had not had. Last year's students had wanted more guidance:

'Questions given alongside reading material would enable us to have some idea of what to look for.'

This year the students have tackled the difficult reading with confidence and they saw the value of the review in helping them to focus on key issues and identify an argument:

'You've got to find them [arguments] to do a review.'

'The review was better than an essay ... It was asking you about how [far] you understood the terms.'

'Doing a review was really useful, because it means I have to study the text fully and understand all the issues to write the review.'

They also appreciated the review's role in helping them to create a concise written record of an argument and relevant points:

'We had to summarize succinctly ... it's very difficult getting all your arguments into such a short space.'

'It shows how far you have understood your reading of the article. It shows whether you can spot relevant points.'

'A review helps you to summarize and make sure you understand what has been discussed. Much better than writing an essay.'

'The reviews helped me to use the critical ideas. I tried to show my understanding and to recap on what was discussed. It helped me to summarize and make sure you knew what had been discussed. They were much better than writing an essay.'

Impact on staff

Before we started using reviews to assess this unit the tutors involved used Essays. There was a real worry amongst tutors that a focus on developing assessment-related teaching materials would produce dull students who were over-dependent on staff for guidance. Our experience has been that structuring teaching does not lead to dependency. When asked this question, the tutor who piloted the materials replied:

'Setting up more formal structures of teaching has not made the students more dependent ... if anything it's made them less so. The students are not as shy of criticising the reading we ask them to do and they ask more questions.'

Having used this assessment at level one, the tutor concerned felt that it could be usefully adapted for other levels. He felt that the experience had given him the confidence to experiment, and that the students had benefited from seeing tutors doing this. They themselves could see courses changing and being reviewed and this culture of experiment and variety was a positive thing. One tutor felt that the practice could be usefully repeated at third level. Following a visit to a production of the Royal Shakespeare Company, students would be required to write an independent critical review for a unit on Renaissance Literature.

Tutors elected to mark the reviews by pass/fail because the course was first level and they wanted to stress the importance of development rather than the arithmetical mark. Of course, one of the risks of using pass/fail is that students may not take assessment seriously. However, this has not been our experience. Tutors have found that the students follow the review guidelines carefully and take the review writing seriously. We found that providing clear instructions for students was a very productive way of communicating key criteria and learning outcomes.

Although it takes time to develop and embed this assessment design, tutors substituting two 500-word reviews for an essay have found their marking load significantly reduced. Marking is also more focused.

Examples of student work

English Studies - Texts and Issues

Book Review - Literary Theory, A Very Short Introduction by Jonathan Culler

As the title suggests Literary Theory - A Very Short Introduction aims to give the reader a short, accessible awakening to the World of literary theory. The book by Jonathan Culler appears to be aimed at a target audience of students, who like myself have not previously encountered the theory aspect of literature in great depths prior to obtaining this book. As a member of the target audience I felt it would be interesting to see what effect the book had on me and how far Jonathan Culler can be deemed to have achieved his aims.

After reading the first chapter of the book entitled What is theory? I was impressed by the way the author attempted to use everyday situations that you or I may encounter to introduce the reader to literary theory

e.g. "Why did Laura and Michael split up?"

"Well my theory is that...." (page 2)

Occasionally throughout the book Culler uses this technique of familiar situations to explain the basics without the use of complex literary terms as well as comic strip style cartoons. All in all this creates a very informal atmosphere when reading the book, which ~~for me personally~~ is important when encountering subjects such as literary theory as it grasps and holds my attention longer than formal continuous prose would. Another commendable point arising from the first chapter was Jonathan Culler's use of bulletpoints. Again like the comic strips and conversation style examples this lightened the topics addressed in the book and allowed me to take in the essential elements in an easier to absorb manner.

Occasionally within this book I felt that the author tended to engage in very difficult questions such as what is literature? then embark on a longwinded explanation and never really answers the question. Culler instead gives us a number of theories to look at and then asks us to decide for ourselves as in Chapter 2 "What is literature and does it matter?". This is not necessarily a bad thing because I think that with areas such as literary theory and other matters of philosophy there aren't always answers there are merely better questions. *is this his point? Examples?*

In conclusion as a result of reading this book I did feel that I had a basic understanding of literary theory. I must admit that I began to read the book with a pre-formed view of literary theory. My preconceived perception was that literary theory would be dire and take the imagination out of books and instead substitute it for a more scientific, reasoned form. However after reading Culler's "Literary Theory - A Very Short Introduction" my view was not so negative. I cannot dispute the fact that in comparison to other books and authors from different genres that I may and have come across on the course this book does not rate highly, not as a result of the author but more of subject, nevertheless I feel that this book did achieve some of its aims as it did introduce me to new aspects of theory I had never encountered.

useful? with a strong sense of evaluation. The last sentence is over long + somewhat tangled as a conclusion. Still, there was a good sense here of the book's intentions + its strengths.

*what is literature
how to do with
this technique?*

if appropriate

A bit cryptic

REVIEW OF JONATHAN CULLER'S "LITERARY THEORY".

This book is targeted at the student approaching literary theory for the first time. Culler demonstrates and explains the various functions of language in literature, from the obvious such as poetry and narrative, to the more complex such as the performative.

Culler does not follow the usual pattern of theory literature, which progress through the various schools of criticism, appearing more straightforward yet are a little intimidating when there is not a ground knowledge of literary techniques. By *Awkward sentence!* first exploring the various techniques, Culler puts the horse before the cart. He *quite right!* introduces the various theories after the concepts behind them have been explained. For example, in chapter 7 he discusses performative language. He then goes on to discuss "Queer theory", which in turn reinforces the comprehension of performative language. He also discusses what the reader brings to the text, and makes the distinction between common sense and historical construction, which paves the way for many theories such as Psychoanalysis and Marxism.

Culler draws the reader in by titling the initial chapters with simple questions such as "What is theory" to demonstrate the accessibility of the book. The language is fairly informal and some familiar and simple examples are used to make his point. For example, he demonstrates the subjective definition of literature by comparing it to a weed. This comical approach is repeated to illustrate potentially difficult concepts throughout the text; "Nuke a whale for

Jesus" (pg. 35) for example, to demonstrate intertextuality, while simultaneously showing how it is not exclusive to literature.

He also takes one example and uses it in many different ways throughout the book. "The secret sits" is such an example, which becomes familiar with the reader. Consequently, the concept applied to this example is more 'reader friendly'.

Culler is objective in his writing as he presents us with various arguments and leaves us to form our own opinions. In chapter 3 he poses the question "Is cultural studies a capacious project within which literary studies gain new power and insight? Or will cultural studies swallow up literary studies and destroy literature?" (pg. 44). He goes on to give background, but rather than providing us with an answer, he raises more questions. By answering questions with questions and analyzing texts from various angles, he trains the reader to look for interpretations of texts by asking their own questions and drawing their own conclusions.

As the title suggests, it is a short introduction. It opens the door to literary theory and instructs the reader in how to approach it. He confirms that theory is endless and will never be mastered. It is "A resource for constant upstagings" (pg. 15) "Theory is a bunch of (mostly foreign) names" (pg. 2).

Rather than be intimidated by the vastness of the subject, we should see it as a "prospect of further thought." (Pg. 122)

Very good. Clear, concise + to the point. A very useful summary + evaluation.

Reading dossier

Description of initiative

A double second year option, with an intake of twenty students, 'Popular Writing', has been redesigned to increase the amount of time students allocate to note-taking and independent research prior to completing their own extended piece of academic writing. Previously, students participated in a series of seminars, each one introducing them to a new 'genre' of popular writing. Having selected a related topic, they were assessed by draft essay proposal and by an extended piece of academic writing. Tutors had noted a growing tendency amongst students to leave preparatory research, evaluation of sources and planning for the extended essay until the second term. Students were increasingly treating this unit as a dissertation option, selecting the seminars they attended and asking to write extended pieces on authors and genres not included on the course.

There are several ways of making the importance of good note-taking and research skills more explicit to students. Many departments offer study skills units or research skills booklets. Elsewhere in the School of Humanities, Film tutors have productively asked students to compile a dossier for a first year introductory film course. Students are advised to include lecture and screening handouts, notes relating to all essential reading and background texts, all preparatory material relating to essays and any additional material including press cuttings, notes taken from further reading and screening notes made about films not on the course.

Taken overall, we found these film studies students beginning to think more carefully about what they were noting down from the material they were asked to read and view. There was clear progression, for example, in the quality of the screening notes which the students were making. In one dossier, in about the fourth week, the student started to write down details of the film to illustrate elements of *mise en scène*:

King Kong Screening

Spotlight title sequence
Est. shot of harbour
crazy voyage - Karl Denim - wants best pictures
secretive
little Monkey 'Beauty and the Beast'
Finds necklace
knife in Kong's hand - sympathy
saves Fay Wray
POV shot of planes

A few weeks later, taking screening notes for *His Girl Friday*, the same student seems much more assured and the notes make more sense. The student is more confident about what they are seeing, the techniques used and the significance of behaviour, props, scenery etc.

His Girl Friday

Newsprint est topic + intro title and
The tracking shot.
She's popular, flirting with partner
Hildy Walt - both decked out in expensive clothing
She doesn't have too high an opinion of Walt. Walt seems to want Hildy back...
Use of deep focus
Press room scene fills in some of the background info

Building on the evidence of improved student learning, we decided to redesign 'Popular Writing' to include a reading dossier. The added value of the reading dossier was its potential to improve student understanding of the primary and secondary reading set, their ability to think critically about that reading and the use to which they should put it, and their ability to communicate their own insights.

Previously, students had not been required to submit anything more than a draft proposal at Christmas. In the new assessment design, we ask students to complete and submit a reading dossier as well. The dossier was to include notes made during seminars, notes made for seminars on primary and secondary reading, and notes on any extra reading. Continuation to the second semester is now conditional on completion of the dossier. Students submit the dossier with their draft proposal and are asked to evaluate both using a form. As a result we have found that feedback and dialogue between student and tutor, about the scope of the research required for their extended essay, has improved.

Ways of using reading dossiers

Because our version of the reading dossier focuses on the learning experiences going on in seminars (we encourage students to include preparatory notes for, and notes made during, seminars), we devised a series of exercises and guided questions to help students write up seminar notes and practise their note-taking and research skills. Independent learning, informed by collaborative learning, is at the heart of the reading dossier project. The reading dossier is premised on the theory that writing about new information or ideas enables students to understand better and remember them. It also contends that reflecting on course content – making notes on the notes – generates more insight and connection than merely taking notes and thus fosters the habit of questioning which is at the heart of analytical enquiry.

We explain the purpose and function of the reading dossier in the very first meeting of tutor and students.

Guidelines for keeping a reading dossier

As part of the course, you need to draw together any handouts and any notes you take – during seminars and during viewing and reading – into a dossier. I also strongly recommend that you write notes on these materials, summarize group discussion and continue thinking about issues raised in your own time.

The dossier should be a notebook of your reading in the area of popular fiction and culture which you need to hand in with your proposal in January. You can also use the dossier to help you write your proposal. Any additional reading on theory and texts you may do in the course of the semester should go in your dossier, and build up your own bibliography in addition to my reading lists. I am the only person who will see the dossier, but in doing so I will be better able to help you with any problems you may have had with the reading, questions you might have, and also help you to identify your strengths. The dossier enables me to help you get started on the long essay element of the course and helps you to remember what we have covered and what you have thought and discussed with everyone else throughout the course.

Preparatory reading groups

In the first session we hold with students, we also ask them to practise writing up seminar notes for inclusion. Last year the tutor selected a controversial piece from Mickey Spillane's novel, *I, The Jury*, for a discussion of what makes writing popular. The tutor recalled that the session was hard work – and dominated by the male students in the group. The students told us that they found the piece difficult and they were not sure how to position themselves as readers:

'The Mickey Spillane piece, I remember that! The last line!'

'Oh I know, the one with the lady in the hat! That was about feminist issues.'

'When the tutor said the last line justified it and brought it out of the depths, I found the last line was the most insulting. The men justified it by saying he may come back...'

'He set that to show that all popular fiction provokes a response.'

When writing up their notes of the seminar some students used their dossiers to try out their own interpretations of the text and to deal with its problematic nature.

Passage seems to be written by a male for males. Writing for mass masculine audience fits into Anglo Saxon tradition (WASP), because it seems to rely on people recognising the Madonna/Whore attitudes to women. Anglo Saxon, European, familiar to USA culture, universal knowledge of USA to some extent. Good writing? The male point of view in the passage seems to be accepted as the universal point of view e.g. 'I was only human', human being = male. It reads as a male fantasy. Something that men would fantasize about but be too scared to face it if it happened in reality. He describes her through her physical attributes e.g. her shoulders, legs, muscles on thighs...Very stereotypical view of a slightly dangerous femme fatale. If there is pleasure to be gained from reading this passage it is likely to be gained by male readers.

We also made sure that the students had the opportunity to define themselves as readers of popular fiction by asking them to select their own text and argue for it in the next session.

The value of having the reading dossier on hand to work out responses is underlined by a comment made by another student:

'I think it is good to write down because there's going to be your own reaction, and the seminar reaction which is not necessarily the same.'

Experience suggests that many students (particularly Literature ones) find it difficult to accept that the popular fiction their grandparents and parents take on holiday with them is worth studying. On first reading popular fiction, many are also often disturbed by the stereotypical representations of gender and race. The formative exercise outlined above was designed to raise their awareness of some of the issues surrounding the study of popular fiction. The next stage was to move them from their personal experience to a position where they were able to take notes and conduct research in the field independently and with confidence. Having asked the students to discuss primary texts which many of them felt distanced from as readers, we asked them to read some theoretical reasons for and against the study of popular culture. We had quite distinct aims for this second session, which were as follows:

- To allow the students to experience some of the approaches to popular culture which they could follow up and use to interpret popular texts.
- To provide a strategy for reading secondary texts which takes into account their nervousness before the literature.
- To help them shape sources to support their own interpretations.

Exercise 1

Preparatory Reading: Leavis, F.R. (1994) 'Mass civilisation and minority culture', in Storey J. (ed) *Cultural theory and popular culture: a reader*, Basingstoke: Harvester Wheatsheaf. Storey, J. (1994) 'Popular Culture', in Storey, J. (ed) *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: a reader*, Basingstoke: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Fold a piece of paper in half. On one side, summarize Leavis's key points. Be declarative, stating your reading as though you're sure of yourself and the author's intentions. Begin your writing with a description of the critical text and what it means.

Now on the other side, begin your statements with 'But something bothers me...'. On this side, question your assertions of what Leavis is saying. Think about contradictions, about what the sentences do not say directly. Relate what is said to personal experience and subjective responses. Do not censor the outrageous or the improbable. (Meyer: 1993)

Exercise 2

Divide into six small groups. Each group should take one of Storey's six ways of defining popular culture and summarize the key points in their section.

Whole group convenes to compile a summary of the whole section.

Back in groups, prioritize the ways of making meaning from popular texts which Storey describes and which you prefer. Why do you think you will find these more interesting and satisfying ways of reading, discussing and writing about texts than the others?

Include a write-up of your seminar notes in your reading dossier.

This time the dossier provides students with a place to rewrite the authoritative arguments of required secondary reading in their own words. In later sessions, we increase the difficulty of this task by asking students to read selected secondary texts in conjunction with primary ones. The secondary texts get increasingly harder and are drawn from film criticism and cultural studies as well as literary theorists. The process is intended to give students greater confidence in their own interpretations of texts, and confidence in using criticism from other areas of study. When reading *Dr No*, for example, the same student who backed-off from Mickey Spillane writes with more confidence in her dossier, supporting assertions with references to the text. She also summarizes Tony Bennett's refutation of Umberto Eco in *Bond and Beyond: the political career of a popular hero* (Bennett & Woolcott: 1987).

Have to contextualize Bond within time in which he was written about. Coming in when Britain is no longer dominant in world power ... Fears and anxieties about WASP domination. Bond has to defeat Dr No and help girl. P. 118 Honey teases Bond about strength he might not have – 'perhaps it's weak'. Doesn't have power.

Eco analyses Bond novels in terms of a set of contrasting pairs, a pair of characters such as hero/villain, or hero/woman; and pairs of values cupidity/idealism. In Fleming – the villain is a bureaucrat and the hero is an improviser. Eco's division inadequate – world of the thriller is not divided into two categories but three...

Drafting proposals

One of the things students find hard about a long essay, or dissertation, is deciding what to write about. One of the main reasons for insisting that students hand in a draft proposal at the same time as their reading dossier, is to make explicit the fact that they already have a resource to draw from when deciding and planning their own extended essay title.

Because we wanted to foster the value of collaborative learning for any independently completed assessment task, we also decided to allocate seminar time for the drafting of the proposal for study. This meant that everyone was familiar with the criteria for the extended essay, aware of how other students interpreted and fulfilled these criteria and could try ideas out on their peers.

Exercise 1

Preparation: For the next session try to come up with some questions you might like to do, or areas you would like to write about. In effect, come in with some proposals. Use the form to help you evaluate the usefulness of your reading dossier and to start sketching out a proposal.

Additional Notes: At the same time as you submit the dossier you need to submit a draft proposal for the extended essay. I suggest that you begin by giving a statement of intent, that is the central idea or the question (I am going to look at...). Then identify the primary materials to be used, that is, what texts (Mills & Boon or Bond, film, book or both). Then identify appropriate theoretical or methodological approaches. Finally, give an indication of the overall structure of your essay. When you make a list of the primary and secondary texts you will be using you **MUST** use the standard reference and bibliographic practice as illustrated in the student guide.

Exercise 2

Read the two sample draft proposals. They are based on work proposed by students last year. As you read them ask yourself if they communicate:

- a manageable statement of intent, which contains a question
- identification of primary materials to be used
- identification of appropriate theoretical or methodological approaches
- indication of overall dissertation structure
- skeleton bibliography, which is set out using the guidelines in the student handbook.

Exercise 3

If you are finding it difficult to generate a topic for the extended essay, start by considering the texts you have enjoyed reading. Then have a look at your reading dossier, to remind you of the themes and issues which were discussed in the seminar on that text and the secondary material you read. Then complete the following statement:

In my extended essay I would like to explore the relationships between _____ (title or text) and _____ (title of text). These two texts seem to be related in the following ways: _____ I think these connections are important because _____ (Meyer: 1993)

Each student should then present their central theme to another person – who should write down the idea as they hear it and suggest at least one text/secondary source that they have read and think is appropriate.

The session has three distinct but related activities. First, the students practice using an evaluation form to identify the features of their reading dossiers which may help them to highlight appropriate topics for study and a draft proposal. Secondly, they follow this independent activity with a group evaluation of a draft proposal using the form. This gives them a sense of what makes a productive proposal. Thirdly, they are asked to go back to their reading dossiers and draft proposals and to think through how they might be improved.

One of the reasons for suggesting that students compare and contrast texts, is that we have found that the best assessed work uses comparison and contrast to demonstrate understanding of who controls knowledge, and how practices and discourses give content meaning and value. Encouraging students who are unsure of topics to practise comparisons and contrasts, helps them to improve both the structure of their work and to identify issues worth following through.

Reproduced below is one of the sample draft proposals we handed out to students. The sample was fictional – created by us from various student drafts over the last couple of years.

Bond is not and never can be a millennium man.

The last two Bond films have attempted to make 007 a hero for the millennium. They offer less stereotypical roles for women, less racial stereotyping – they suggest that Bond can be a suitable hero for the millennium. However, it seems to me that a leopard never changes its spots. Fleming's works are rooted in the ideology of colonialism and patriarchal ascendancy. Whilst modern day scriptwriters have moved away from these dominant ideologies, the themes are essentially the same. Consequently, current Bond movies can be read as an example of our nostalgia for the way things were, rather than a radical break with tradition. Whilst the film scriptwriters soften the unpleasantness of Fleming's texts, they still create a white, male hero of global capitalism who patronizes anyone who is different.

I will argue my case by comparing and contrasting the representation of Bond in the movies and the novels. By looking at the functions performed by both Bonds – what is expected of them, what fears and anxieties are generated, what active roles they play in the thriller narrative of film and text and what values they seem to embody – it is hoped that a common ideological agenda can be elicited. The book I will use to illuminate this agenda will be *Bond and Beyond*.

(198 words)

Contents

Introduction (will be the draft proposal – see above)

Chapter 1: Background to Bond: Fleming's Life

Chapter 2: Summary of argument in *Bond and Beyond: the political career of a popular hero* (Bennett & Woolcott: 1987).

Chapter 3: Fleming's Bond

Chapter 4: Bond on screen

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Bibliography

Bennett, T. & Woolacott, J. (1987) *Bond and Beyond: the political career of a popular hero*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Education.

Dr No by Ian Fleming

Dr No on screen

Goldfinger by Ian Fleming

Goldfinger on screen

Impact on students

Preparatory reading group

Whilst our students initially found the reading a challenge (and a struggle) they also recognized its worth:

'It is important to be able to analyse whether something is achieving what it sets out to do, and to analyse what it is actually doing, how the reader may have been manipulated by the text, and how the text has responded to society and culture. It's a dialogic situation isn't it? From text to reader and reader to text. That's the same for literature: I mean how often do we have lectures that explain what Chaucer was saying to his society at that time?'

It has to be said that not all the students were happy about extending the scope of study to a broader notion of culture including visual readings.

'I understood that Popular Fiction was mainly literature, but there's been large chunks of TV and film, which, had I known about it, would have put me off, because I can't be bothered with that. "Popular Culture" would have been a better title.'

'We often watch films on this course, but they're never as good [as book].'

'It was strange sitting with your pen and paper watching a programme – just because it's not the norm is it? But I think it makes you get into it, really. Because I'm going to be doing how women are depicted in science fiction, so you kind of look at how they are, and you realize that in science fiction there's not much of a role for women. It does make you focus.'

Reading dossiers

Students used the reading dossiers to practise writing down difficult ideas in their own words.

'I try to write my opinions down before I read anyone else's because it gets so confusing. I know last year I got to the point where I couldn't remember what my opinion was! So now I write it down so I can see, "oh yes I thought this". It might change, but if you get to the point that you do completely forget, or you get to the point that you've got no opinion whatsoever, then you can go back and remind yourself.'

Even more encouraging was their willingness to extract theories and methods of analysis from the set reading and apply them to their own selection of material culture:

'We had to collect some adverts and read this article and relate it to them. But the thing that jumped into my mind were these photographs, so I searched the Internet, got the photographs, and did myself a little justification for why I believe these photographs fulfilled these criteria. Doing that made this very dry, difficult bit of theory useable, workable, it got so I could deal with it... The last one we did [took notes from an article] I've got my little note form here: I didn't relate it to adverts, I related it to propaganda photographs and I did a little handout, which was just to myself, which justified how this theory could be used for this and not just for adverts. That helped me to get my head round the issues that were being raised. I stick them into the dossier...'

Interviews with students suggested that they saw the difficulty and variety of the set critical reading increase as the course progressed and felt equipped to deal with this:

'In a way there's a progression because you use the tools as you go along and it gets easier. I mean, could you imagine trying to use the stuff on science fiction right at the beginning? It was hard enough doing that when we did...'

'Some of the things I wrote early on are not as good as I would do now, but I would leave them in because they give an indication that you have progressed. It's silly to change it and make it look as if you haven't changed at all, but saying we've progressed, I don't know how sophisticated it is!'

'You do question, now, see more in texts. You read everything as opposed to just accepting anything about it.'

'I found the course quite difficult, especially last year, when we were doing about a book a week, but it does give you a broad base to work from, in retrospect I think it was worth doing it that way. I think so, yes.'

Drafting proposals

Students appeared confident about the task in hand and had clearly benefited from the opportunity to view and evaluate other draft proposals

'I feel more confident about doing my proposal now I've seen those proposals, to see how someone else has done it.'

'I think it's hard work. We normally get a nice list of questions saying choose one. Don't think for yourselves. We've done it for you!'

'I found it hard to choose my own title. It's been easy in the past, because they've set the essay titles. But it's taken quite a bit to get it worded, and even the title, since the proposal – I've had to mess with it. So it was good, because it was hard, because it's not what we're used to.'

Several also seemed to make use of the compare and contrast model we introduced to them:

'[I want to compare and contrast film and text in my extended essay] because of an essay I'd read, and the lady [critic] had looked at the message the text was giving, how it had been manipulated and changed in the film, because society had moved on and changed, so it was aimed at a different audience, written by a different part of society. It was really interesting.'

'I'm comparing two films and two novels; I'm not cross-comparing [looking at adaptations]. I'm doing detective films and books. I think if you compare the likes of "Miss Marple" with detective series today, you get interesting things.'

Later, when they had written and submitted their proposals along with their evaluation form, they found the subsequent tutor feedback useful:

'[The feedback on the proposal] helped me with the structure, because I was going to do two texts, and she helped me to see how I could do them together, rather than keeping them separate. So I'm changing the structure and it's loads better!'

'It's done the same for me, actually, rather than talking about one text here and the other one there, I'm now going to concentrate on a comparison of the two, and I'm discussing them together.'

'It was useful because I was worried I'd made a complete mess of it, but you found out that actually you did know what you were doing and it set you off thinking, "oh, I can do this after all, I'm not on the wrong lines."'

Impact on staff

The reading dossier and associated strategies were piloted by two members of staff. One had a background in Film and Cultural Studies, the other in Literature with an interest in Cultural Studies. Although both made changes to the reading they asked students to do, it proved easy to alter the emphasis of the set reading to reflect the different approaches. The first time we ran the course the focus was on audience reception, the second time on genre.

Although they're not marked, continuation to the second semester is conditional on handing in the draft proposal and reading dossier. This year the problem of students selecting which seminars to attend recurred. Other students felt that their development was hampered by this absenteeism. A possible solution would be to agree ground rules for the conduct of seminars in week one. The students who did attend wanted severe penalties for those who did not and wanted to see the reading dossiers given a mark rather than being pass/fail. They wanted this primarily to improve seminar attendance. Those that came to all the sessions recognized the benefits. They liked the idea of keeping a steady record and also saw the dossier as an alternative to an assessed seminar. If tutors were to take up these students' recommendations that the dossiers should be marked, the following guidelines might be followed. Regularity of entries, length of entries and appropriateness are three useful guidelines for evaluating dossiers in small classes and monitoring attendance at those classes. The dossier should show a continuous involvement with the course material through the semester. There should be no holes, nor any obvious and extended lapses of interest. These broad holistic evaluation criteria can then be matched to broad grade ranges. (Fulwiler: 1997)

Our students used their dossiers to improve their academic writing. They used them to record, summarize and note down ideas and concepts which had been raised in seminars. They also used them to include written summaries of the articles they had read. An alternative approach would be to encourage the students to link their personal experiences and their reading by making journal entries. Although this option was outlined in the student handbook, it clearly needed more vigorous flagging-up for the students to feel confident about practising the approach. (Fulwiler: 1997)

Our experience suggests that the practice of writing up discussion and research notes in the dossier does help students to integrate knowledge and methodologies from several subject sources. The draft proposal we include at the end of this section illustrates this well. Here we have a student selecting and describing difficult concepts which they have encountered on the course and making them their own.

One of the disadvantages of using reading dossiers formatively is that they are labour intensive. Ways to make this less so would be to ask students to prepare a mini-dossier of materials from the course which relate solely to the draft proposal. However, we think the gain in student confidence is ample reward for the extra time spent reading and marking the dossiers.

Sample draft proposal

— great title

Title

'The El Monte P.D. had Dead White Woman Fever'

Masculinity and Misogyny in Modern American Crime Writing.

It is my intention to discuss examples of masculinity and misogyny in contemporary American crime writing.

My essay will feature substantially, two works by the writer James Ellroy. I have selected L.A. Confidential (1990) and My Dark Places (1996) as primary sources. I have chosen these sources as they are both hugely successful bestsellers; but also because they both contain evidence of the above social ills, whilst demonstrating the potential of the genre to be morally and socially challenging.

The first section of the essay will focus on L.A. Confidential. The work features 'noir' and intricate plotting common to the crime genre. I will argue that the text also uncovers wider debate on masculinity in crime fiction and 'gendered' crime.

The second section will feature another Ellroy work 'My Dark Places', a memoir of the unsolved murder of the writer's mother. Ellroy, has himself, defended this work as, 'explicitly explored threads of misogyny in America today. I shall elaborate on this and incorporate feminist criticism of crime writing.

Throughout the essay, I aim to assert Ellroy's works as illuminating, provocative and unique in their genre. Therefore I shall also include (less detailed) discussion of several other contemporary texts, which I will argue to be less responsible in their demonstration of masculinity and misogyny.

Primary Sources

Ellroy, J. L.A. Confidential Amw 1990
Ellroy, J. My Dark Places Amw 1996
Ellroy, J. Clandestine Amw 1980
Ellroy, J. The Black Dahlia Amw 1989

Secondary Sources

Bennett, T Popular Fiction
Cawelti, J.G. Adventure, Mystery and Romance Chicago
University Press 1976

Messant, P. (Ed) Criminal Proceedings - The Contemporary American
Crime Novel Pluto London 1998
in which Cohen, J 'James Ellroy, L.A. and the spectacular
crisis of masculinity' (1998)

Muncie, J & McLaughlin (Eds) The Problem of Crime
Sage London 1996

Munt, S.R. Murder By the Book. Feminism and the Crime
Novel Routledge London/N.Y. 1992

Priestman, M Crime Fiction From Poe to the Present
Northcote House (1998)

Other texts to be discussed:

Vachss, A Shella (PAN 1997)
Cornwell, P Body of Evidence (Warner)
various 'true crime' texts

Evaluation form for final work

Reading dossier/draft proposal evaluation form

The aims of this form are:

- to help your tutor give you feedback and guidance on your proposal for the extended essay
- to help your tutor give you feedback and guidance on the work patterns and research processes evident in your portfolio
- to give you an opportunity to list any aspects of your work to date, or future plans that you would particularly like to have your tutor's opinion on, at your first tutorial meeting.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Proposed Title of Extended Essay _____

1. Essay proposal

The tutor reading your proposal is looking to see that it includes the following things. Check that your draft statement includes:

- A manageable statement of intent, which contains a question. YES/NO
- Identification of primary materials to be used. YES/NO
- Identification of appropriate theoretical or methodological approaches. YES/NO
- An indication of overall dissertation structure. YES/NO
- A skeleton bibliography, which is set out using the guidelines in the student handbook. YES/NO

Tutor's comments

2. Portfolio

The tutor reading your portfolio is looking at the work patterns and research processes you have developed over semester one to see that they include the following things. Does your portfolio demonstrate:

- Your ability to take notes from articles, books and reference sources. YES/NO
- Your ability to organize seminar and research notes and ideas in a meaningful order. YES/NO

Tutor's comments

3. List below any aspects of your work to date that you would particularly like your tutor's opinions on.

4. List the action points agreed between you and your tutor (first tutorial meeting).

Date met with tutor _____

Signed _____

Signed _____

Assessing students in seminars

Description of initiative

An alternative option to 'Popular Writing', 'American Modernisms' is also a second level option with an intake of twenty students. Conventional assessment by essay and exam has been replaced by a combination of oral and written assignment. The new assessment strategy is designed to foster the active and collaborative learning practised by tutors in 'Texts and Issues'. The practice also increases the range of transferable skills available to students by testing their ability to communicate research in the form of a presentation.

The unit focuses on a variety of texts produced and consumed in the interwar period in America. This involves the study of the Harlem Renaissance, the writers of the so-called 'lost generation' as well as American women writers' responses to modernism. The unit is one of only four American Literature units available at levels two and three. As such, the tutor does not expect depth of knowledge about American Literature but is looking to build and develop flexible thinking about texts. An introduction to American writing is provided in the first year.

Students are required to give a class presentation on a topic related to themes dealt with in the course. These presentations are given individually and each last between seven and twelve minutes. Presentations are assessed in terms of content and delivery and form 30 per cent of the final mark. The other 70 per cent is by assessed essay. The tutor is looking for clarity of exposition, coherence of argument, evidence of research, effective use of analogy, awareness of, and engagement with, the audience and ability to respond to questions. The students are also given a handout entitled 'Making Presentations' which helps them think about structuring their argument and organising their material, designing overheads and engaging with their audience.

The added value of assessing students in seminars is that it fosters the value of collaborative learning for independent assessment. The students look critically at a particular extract or poem in order to analyse the way in which the text produces a particular way of seeing or saying. They then have to present a case arguing why these details are significant in the context of American Modernism. Assessing presentations formatively also provides opportunities for tutors to feedback early and for students to receive feedback from their peers.

To summarize, the key reasons motivating the tutor to assess group work and presentations are to:

- improve students' capacity to understand and communicate the subject
- develop skills associated with the oral and visual presentation of ideas
- encourage collaborative research
- develop student confidence in presenting an argument.

Assessing students in seminars highlights the role that discussion and presentation can play in helping students to make sense of a subject and to gain confidence in collaborative research practices. In our example, oral work is given a lower weighting than coursework. Its overall impact on degree classification is therefore low. Using oral assessment formatively is, however, a valuable aid to learning. It can pick up misunderstandings early on, and give immediate feedback on ideas and key concepts.

This new approach was developed primarily to improve student academic writing by offering practise in reading texts in context and reflecting on the impact of arguments on peers. The following extract from a handout to students illustrates the kinds of realistic practical advice it is possible to give, with the intention of improving student contribution to debate and the quality of their preparatory reading.

Guidance for class papers

The class papers not only examine your presentation skills but they also provide you with an opportunity to prepare for your essay. Your close reading can be used to develop an argument in response to one of the essay questions or, if you find that your presentation is leading you in an alternative direction, you can produce your own essay question (though you will need to consult with your tutor if you do this). When choosing your extract try to select the text you might want to write an essay on. While you do not have to develop your close reading into an essay, you will save yourself much time and energy if you do so.

When compiling class papers:

- You should include the examination, in detail, of either a poem or an extract from one of the texts being studied on the course.
- You should pay particular attention to the ways in which the piece is written. This should not simply be a summary of the plot.
- You should try to identify the key characteristics of the piece in terms of narrative or poetic technique
- Your presentation should coincide with the seminar session devoted to the text you are analysing. This is very important, since your presentation will provide the class with an important basis for further discussion.

Assessment criteria

- a) Clear expression. You should make sure that the paper is presented clearly so that the audience is able to appreciate your argument.
- b) Coherent structure. Even though you are looking at an extract, there should be a sense of a beginning, a middle and an end. The introduction should outline your argument, the middle section should explicate the argument and the conclusion should provide a summation of the main points and further questions the paper raises.
- c) Critical analysis. This is very important. You should be looking critically at a particular extract or poem in order to analyse the way in which it produces a particular way of seeing or saying. I am looking for attention to detail but also a sense of why these details are significant in the context of American Modernism.
- d) Time management. All papers will be timed and if they exceed twelve minutes, or come under seven minutes, marks will begin to be deducted. You should be aiming at speaking for ten minutes.
- e) Awareness of, and engagement with, the audience. Try to avoid reading the paper out verbatim. You may use notes, but if you familiarize yourself with the material sufficiently, you will be able to look up and talk directly to your audience when you need to.

Impact on students

Interviews with our students suggested that they benefited from the assessment of their presentations. They gained confidence, clarity, an awareness of audience, and an increased sense of the importance of supporting argument with textual analysis. They were also clearly aware of the restrictions which presentations imposed on their material, and were ready to move on to the essay.

'A presentation is relatively short, however, it makes you consider one or two aspects of a novel closely.'

'Doing a presentation helps you to research general themes, then relate them to texts in detail. This is helpful. The only problem is you don't want to make the talk boring so some ideas may be disregarded because they're too long-winded.'

'Because the time limit only allows for certain information to be revealed, it doesn't allow me to express fully my ideas. However, questions and discussions do open up ideas and if key points have been raised a wider context will be developed.'

The language these Northumbria students use to describe the experience of preparing for a presentation shows that they do see oral assessment as a valuable precursor to academic writing:

'Preparation is the same as an assignment. You talk to staff with a set of ideas. Read up in the library. Discuss with your group the structure of the talk. You decide on visual material. You learn, from other groups and past presentations, what works well.'

'I watch tutors delivering lectures and observe any useful things, like pause for effect. I read around the topic and find out which points are dominant as these will be key points to be used. I outline my presentation, consult other members, if needed, and then talk to the tutor in charge to see how it looks. I then practise delivering the presentation, trying to pause, alter the voice tone and be in control of information so it can be delivered directly to the audience.'

Impact on staff

The tutors involved remarked that while students are initially anxious about giving presentations, they do enjoy doing independent research and most of them are happy about being assessed in this way. However, some students do not appear to be interested in hearing other students' presentations and are unwilling to ask questions. This means that the discussion afterwards can be between the unit tutor and the students giving the presentation. Suggestions for avoiding this situation include asking those listening to note down three key points and having a rotating student chair for the ensuing debate. Further examples of tutors assessing students in seminars can be found on the project's Web site at <http://www.unn.ac.uk/assessingenglish>.

The tutor gives feedback independently to the students, who are required to hand in a summary of their contribution to the session and any handouts or notes they made for the session.

Conclusion

The argument for diversifying assessment and using assessment formatively to support active student learning is, we believe, made convincingly in this case study. We hope that you will give serious consideration to our suggestion that review writing, reading dossiers and oral assessment are all tools capable of bringing coherence and confidence to students' study of newer areas of the English curriculum, and are a means of enabling the transition from dependent to independent learning.

In terms of take-up, the most obviously successful initiative of the three practices we developed was the use of review writing at level one. Three hundred students have now passed through this course and when interviewing students at level two they frequently referred back to the review, and how useful it had been. The reduction in marking-loads and improved standards of academic writing at the end of the year also point to the success of this initiative.

Our use of a reading dossier and assessment of students in seminars has affected a smaller number of students – no more than sixty in total. The evidence that these initiatives helped to improve students' learning and performance in assessment is also strong.

As Head of the English subject division, I am always on the look out for more developments and opportunities to change assessment, in order to maintain the division's reputation for promoting active student learning.

As project director, I am happy that we have successfully diversified assessment across a range of newer units, to improve student learning in ways which illustrate the agenda sketched out in the Assessment and the *Expanded* Text's mission statement.

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