

Writing Textbooks in a Cold – but Changing? – Climate

Rob Pope, Research Co-ordinator in English in the School of Arts and the Humanities, Oxford Brookes University, asks questions about – and argues for – the writing of textbooks.

To Write or Not to Write?

Is it a good or bad idea for a university academic to be writing textbooks at the moment? Are current conditions helpful or hostile? More particularly, what impact has the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) had on the status of textbook writing? And are there any signs from that last round of a change in policy or expectation?

But what do we mean by ‘a textbook’ in the first place? Sure, it’s a *book for teaching and learning* and it’s *written primarily with students and teachers in mind*. But don’t all academic books seek to teach and invite to learn, and aren’t we all in a fundamental sense ‘students’ of our subjects? More pointedly, where exactly do we draw the lines between, say, elementary introduction and comprehensive companion; or between a ‘reader’ of primary or secondary materials (itself a tricky distinction) and a collection of ‘key’ essays (whether specially commissioned or gathered retrospectively)? Don’t we need to distinguish a mere pot-boiler from a genuinely fresh synthesis?

We also, inevitably, need to sort out what we mean by ‘research’. Sure, it’s what the particular subject community says it is, but there are differences within as well as between the arts and sciences; and even in applied or professional areas ‘research’ can be applied and professed in a wide variety of ways. Certainly it cannot be exclusively limited to so-called ‘discovery research’, emphasizing discovery of the new and previously unknown. But there may still be anxiety about extending it to what may be termed ‘recovery research’, emphasizing recovery of the old and grasping

what was perhaps once known but may now be known differently. In any case, in practice most of us tend to move between or beyond these merely imagined poles. We explore the old/new in pursuit of the un/known. Our research is necessarily retrospective and recursive as well as prospective and progressive. It is in the fullest sense *re-search* – with an essentially dynamic and variable emphasis upon both elements, simultaneously or by turns.

All these issues have a direct bearing on what it is we think we are doing when we are communicating and developing our subject – whether as textbook *and/or* research monograph, for students *and/or* peers. Now that the immediate euphoria or depression of the last RAE has passed we have a sober view of the real costs and consequences: Is it worth it? What was ‘it’ in the first place? Did ‘it’ drive a wedge – or forge links – between teaching and research?

Textbooks are, I suggest, extremely sensitive and symptomatic indicators in these areas. They are exactly on the cusp of the ‘Higher’ and the ‘Education’ in Higher Education, and they flourish or languish according to the prevailing culture. For deeply principled as well as immediately practical reasons, then, it is important that we swap stories and compare histories about the appeals and perils of textbook writing. The latter is arguably the most palpable and durable interface between teaching and research. We are repeatedly enjoined to do both. But are we really encouraged and enabled to ‘link’ them in this way? And what are the penalties as well as the prizes for attempting to do so?

A ‘disciplinary’ matter?

I speak from – but not for – the Arts and Humanities. Some of my colleagues in History or French or Music, not to mention my own subject of English, may have quite different takes on this. And perhaps things are widely different in the Sciences or Social Sciences, where papers rather than books are more central to ‘research culture’ and study generally. What’s the news and what are the views from textbook writers in Biology or Geography, for instance? How representative is the observation made last November by Peter Atkins, a Professor of Chemistry at the University of Oxford and himself a well-established textbook writer (Times Higher Education Supplement ‘Text-book Review’, 30.11.2001, p. xii). Emphasizing the disincentives of the current climate in UK Higher Education, he observes:

The structure of British research is now such that the income of departments is so highly geared to research papers that Head of Departments are compelled to stamp on the green shoots of potential textbook authorship.

Has anybody at Oxford Brookes recently felt themselves to be stamped on – or felt compelled to be doing the stamping – I wonder? Or, to invoke a more familiar metaphor, what forms might the various ‘sticks and carrots’ take? One may be that textbook writing is something that consenting academics are expected to do in private in their own time (at weekends and in the holidays, say) and expect neither departmental recognition nor support for. (I have been fortunate in my department in this respect. Others, I know, haven’t.)

Another carrot – or perhaps it’s a stick (depending who’s wielding it) – is that writers of textbooks are commonly supposed to make pots of money, and therefore shouldn’t expect to dip into university coffers and public funds, too. (The premise of this is sadly untrue, as all but a very few writers of textbooks will confirm. Most writers don’t make nearly enough to make up to their nearest and dearest for all those weekends and holidays in which they may be ‘near’ – locked away upstairs – but anything but ‘dear’.)

Academic folklore and misconception are rife in these areas. It would be good to know from other people engaged in such activities what is really going on. Do they feel valued or marginal – on a money-spinner or a hiding for nothing...?

Changing climate – or rate of exchange?

So, is the ‘climate’ for textbooks, along with other kinds of academic activity, currently changing? Or perhaps we need a less ‘natural’ metaphor. After all, it’s a pretty hard-headed and palpably artificial environment in modern education. Maybe we had better talk of a political-economic notion of ‘rate of exchange’ and of the ‘relative value’ of textbooks.

My own experience is complex and contradictory and may or may not indicate a general trend. For instance, in the last but one RAE (1996) it was judged expedient to enter my work (a large textbook and associated articles) under ‘Education’. This was because, though the ‘content’ was firmly within my area of ‘English’, the methodology was directly concerned with innovative pedagogy (in this case, ways of grasping texts through kinds of rewriting – parody, imitation, adaptation, etc.). The result was that my department got some money in from Education (who got a 3a) whereas we got nothing from our own entry (which got a 2). However, this last time round (2001), in the context of a substantially re-formed department, we decided to re-enter both that book and another larger textbook and associated chapters to the ‘English’ panel as such. Formal written feedback from that panel was generalized and non-specific, so it’s impossible to be sure how they perceived individual items and entries. However, it is difficult to believe that we’d have got what we did (a 5) if my work had been entirely ruled out. And, indeed, spoken feedback by the chair of the ‘English’ panel at a professional meeting later (Oxford, 26 April 2002) confirmed that they had adopted a capacious yet discriminating policy. They had not automatically discounted textbooks simply because that is what they were called by publishers, any more than they had automatically approved supposed

‘research’ articles in prestigious specialist journals. The criterion in every case, he insisted, was that ‘the work should be of substantial national or international significance to the subject or a part of it’. This statement, coupled with the fact that several of the panel members were themselves writers of influential textbooks, was food for comfort.

It should be stressed, however, that none of this guarantees how things will be viewed next time round, in some future incarnation of the RAE. The precise constitution and balance of particular panels will inevitably be different. And the general ground-rules may be changed – and the goal-posts moved – yet again. (One disappointed Head of an English Department recently told me that she now wished they had entered a writer of a particularly well-known textbook, but had been advised against by the chair of the previous panel.). No doubt we are all aware of similar horror or scare stories. It would be good to compare notes on these, between as well as within disciplines, and preferably before not just after the next ‘event’.

We also need to keep a weather eye on the turbulent forces that are producing such partly unpredictable conditions. And as with global warming or acid rain, if there are changes in ‘climate’ or ‘atmosphere’ it is precisely because we have helped produce them – albeit accidentally, as a by-product. Indeed, if there is an increased need or demand for textbooks at exactly the same time as there is a potential threat to the production and supply of good ones, it is because ‘we’ are collectively responsible for many of the contradictory processes that are contributing to this complex state of affairs.

Here, for instance, are some of the general educational and economic conditions that *ought to favour* the writing of textbooks at the present time:

- ♦ The sheer number and variety of students now in HE and the inability of libraries (even with the purchase of multiple copies and restricted borrowing arrangements) to cope with the demands on books and journals.
 - ♦ The demand of fee-paying students and their parents for well-structured and resourced courses – in short, value for money.
 - ♦ The fact that web-based learning, while hugely powerful in some ways, still needs a facilitating base or framework of paper as well as people: even the more free-standing systems (e.g. the Open University) build their multi-medial provision around core textbooks and course-books.
 - ♦ The now relatively well-established subject-based Learning and Teaching Support Network and the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme; both are into their third year of running and already with many textbook and web-based projects in the pipeline (some of my own included).
- In addition, there are some specific conditions here at Oxford Brookes that may be particularly conducive to the design and writing, encouraging and enabling of textbook writing:
- ♦ an explicit policy linking teaching and research, including internal ‘seed-corn’ funding for small-scale projects along with notable success in securing large external funding (many of these have led to enhanced course materials and resources).
 - ♦ a vigorous Publishing Department combining wide experience and expertise in publishing as a business as well as a subject study, including advanced work on the book-web interface (e.g. the MA in Electronic Publishing) and close links with ‘local’ international publishers (Blackwell, OUP, etc.)
- But there are also reasons why all these potentially promising conditions may not be sufficient to support a pervasive change in ‘climate’ – why the ‘exchange rate’ may continue to be set against textbook writing. Put baldly, but with some crucial qualifications, they are:
- ♦ Continuing domination of the RAE – *if* the latter remains skewed towards ‘discovery research’ rather than ‘re-discovery re-search’, and *if* the full value of both is not recognised across the board (differences and divisions in culture between, say, the Sciences and Humanities may continue to be crucial here).

- ◆ Continuing confusion about what it is we are really supposed to be doing and accountable for in HE – *if* an integrated vision of Higher Education is not forthcoming (by combining the functions of Teaching Quality and Research Assessment, for instance).

So what, finally, has all this got to do with textbook writing? *Everything*, I would insist. And as this is the premise upon which the present argument rests, I shall conclude it in terms that are both theoretical and polemical.

A manifesto for textbook writing:

- ◆ Textbook writing is a central, sensitive and symptomatic indicator of all that we do.
 - ◆ Textbooks come into being and operate precisely on the cusp of teaching with research, of education with economics, and of a vision of knowledge as personal empowerment and satisfaction with one of knowledge as public commodity and technological power.
 - ◆ Textbooks are the main interface where the notion of ‘the subject’ in general is embodied in the particular heterogeneity of all the ‘subjects’ who study it; it is therefore the major tool whereby subjects in every sense have lasting effects.
- ◆ Textbooks are also the main site where the fundamental structure and significance of the ‘discipline’ is communicated and debated. It is therefore not only the place where the existing territories are consolidated and boundaries reinforced; but where the work of inter- and cross-disciplinary re-definition and re-negotiation goes on – publicly and accountably, amongst one’s peers as well as students and, sometimes, a more general public.
 - ◆ Textbooks are thus where specialist knowledge and skills are accumulated and made generally accountable as well as accessible. That’s why a good textbook is precious – and a bad one pernicious.
 - ◆ In sum, the writing of good textbooks should be central – not marginal – to our higher educational mission as teachers and researchers.

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Study Day on English and New Technology for Postgraduate Students

The English Subject Centre is seeking expressions of interest in a Study Day for postgraduate students (and their supervisors) working in the broad area of English and new technology. The venue is London, on Friday 23rd May. This would be a free event and we may be able to subsidise travel costs for students attending.

The Study Day would be part of our ongoing support for the application of new technology in English studies. We thought it may be beneficial to facilitate a network of those with related research interests.

We see the day as being shaped by the needs, interests and contributions of the participants. Very broadly however, it might consist of some presentations by supervisors relating to the ‘state of the art’ in current teaching programmes, curriculum development or research, followed by brief student presentations describing their research. There would be plenty of opportunity for discussion, exchange of experience and informal networking.

If you are interested in such an event and/or know of students who may be, please contact the Subject Centre as given on the inside cover.

‘Wit and Wisdome’— Research and Undergraduate Teaching integrated in a National Teaching Fellowship Project

Gweno Williams, National Teaching Fellow and Reader in Early Modern Drama at York St John, College of the University of Leeds looks at the creative and innovative inter-relationships between research and teaching.

In 2002 I was fortunate enough to be awarded a HEFCE-funded £50,000 National Teaching Fellowship to carry out an innovative three year project on student peer-learning in the Arts. Since 2000, the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme¹ has awarded a total of 60 Fellowships across all subject disciplines; 17% (or 10 out of the 60) current Fellows work within the broad subject discipline of English. Half, like myself, are in new universities and colleges, and half in old. A critical mass of English-based National Teaching Fellows now exists, particularly in the north of England. In my view, this offers very exciting potential for subject-based collaboration, influence, and impact on future educational developments. One element of the National Teaching Fellowship brief is to be ‘a task force for national change in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education’. While this resonant formulation may invoke Henry V’s small and valiant army at Agincourt, I am certainly eager to encourage others working in English to move towards a position where they are selected as institutional nominees. The recent White Paper (*The Future of Higher Education*)² proposal to increase the annual number of National Teaching Fellowship awards from 20 to 50 makes such initiatives particularly timely.

The dynamic multi-layered interrelationship or symbiosis between my academic research and my teaching was central to my successful Fellowship application. My inter-disciplinary project will focus on student peer-learning and team skills development across the Arts, whilst the content centres on my academic specialism: early modern women dramatists.

Gweno Williams,
National Teaching
Fellow



I will investigate, develop and monitor undergraduate peer-learning across academic years and disciplines by producing a digital video of a seventeenth century play with no previous recorded performance history, with students. Thus my project combines new technology and old texts; one outcome is that students will be helping to create original digital study resources on seventeenth century drama for other students, worldwide. The resultant video will be available for teaching and learning about seventeenth century drama.³ I also hope it will serve to encourage national and international colleagues to explore this model of interactive interdisciplinary teaching and research. I will thus combine digital video as end product, with the process of interpretation and creative film production with students. My proposal also encompasses pedagogical research, as I will record and evaluate student peer-learning, team skills development and creative problem-solving throughout the process.

The balance or separation or relationship between research and teaching in HE is currently hotly debated. This article offers a personal perspective on how my route towards a National Teaching Fellowship partly originated in a slightly frantic attempt to realise a

¹ Details of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme are available at www.ilt.ac.uk

² Available at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/highereducation/hestrategy/>

³ Gweno Williams *Margaret Cavendish: Plays in Performance*: Video 1 (forthcoming 2003), Video 2 (forthcoming 2005)

personally and professionally satisfying and dynamic balance between research and teaching in demanding times. A consequence of the current rapid pace of change in HE is profound staff anxiety about finding and maintaining the space and opportunity for academic research when the pressures of undergraduate teaching are increasing so rapidly. The dramatic increase in teaching loads in my institution led me into a simultaneously panic-stricken and energised strategy of squeezing elements of my academic research on early modern women dramatists into my introductory Level 1 teaching. My response stemmed from the acute fear that otherwise I would simply no longer have the time to retain sufficient intellectual engagement with my research area.

As I outline below, this necessity-driven experiment was a remarkable success. In a sense, both my National Teaching Fellowship and subsequent academic promotion might be traced back to that crisis decision to firmly embed my research into my teaching. I have never looked back and now firmly believe that it is possible to integrate elements of research and undergraduate teaching, even at introductory level, in a way that is valuable and exciting for both staff and students. Lateral thinking, problem solving strategies and creativity are intrinsic to the discipline of English. My personal experience suggests that ingenuity and creative thinking in a relatively oppositional situation can even energise research and teaching in unexpected and interdependent ways. It is important to make this point at a time when current HE policy and funding debates seem to be attempting to drive research and teaching apart.

It is tempting to see change as a new, and debilitating, pressure in HE. However, I find David Watson’s recent premise that ‘universities have constantly invented and

reinvented themselves’ reassuring.⁴ Watson argues that change, at varying rates, is a constant feature of HE. For example, changes in patterns of student participation are far from new. Widening participation and the integration of marginalised and ‘non traditional’ student groups into HE are currently high on twenty-first century educational and political agendas. However, more than 300 years ago, the prolific dramatist who is the subject of my academic research, Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle (1623-73) expressed acute concern about unequal access to university education in England in her witty and polemical comedy *The Female Academy* (1662)⁵. Cavendish’s futuristic ‘Academy’ offers university education to the largest excluded student group of her day – women. Successive scenes in the play show female students following an intensive programme in ‘Discourse’ (a discipline with elements in common with contemporary English, Theatre Studies and Philosophy) towards the skills-based learning outcome of being able ‘to speak wittily and rationally’. Oral presentation is the exclusive mode of assessment in this particular institution; the topic of the first student assignment is: ‘...are women capable to have as much Wit or Wisdome as men?’⁶ These access students are required to justify their right to higher education from day one.

Contemporary feminist playwright Charlotte Keatley has argued that ‘the best way to understand a play is to put it on its feet’⁷. At the point when my teaching load began to encroach dangerously on any potential research space, my interdisciplinary research already successfully encompassed theatre workshops and stage production of Margaret Cavendish’s plays. My experimental solution to the acute impending crisis was to expand this strategy by involving undergraduates in action research within the curriculum. This problem-solving initiative involved jettisoning two weeks of

⁴ David Watson ‘Reinventing the University-A Personal Perspective’ in *The Effective Academic* edited by Steve Ketteridge, Stephanie Marshall, Heather Fry (Kogan Page 2002) p.7

⁵ Margaret Cavendish *The Female Academy* (1662), available through the *Brown Women Writers Project* at www.wwp.brown.edu

⁶ Margaret Cavendish *The Female Academy* (1662) Act 1 scene 2

⁷ Charlotte Keatley *My Mother said I never should* (Methuen 1994) p. viii

conventional lectures and seminar discussion with a group of students who had only been at university for eight weeks, to film a series of classes on *The Female Academy*. Teaching sessions were reconfigured as ‘the Female Academy’ in action; the lecture theatre became our set temporarily and the female students wore borrowed academic gowns as notional costumes throughout the exercise. The students studied the play by staged reading aloud, interpreting and improvising around the text. Everything that happened in these classes was recorded on digital video, with the help of volunteer third year Film students. It is worth noting that, at this point, I had no experience of digital video as a production medium and had therefore placed myself in a demanding, and public, action-learning situation, alongside my first year students.

Charlotte Keatley also said that ‘The playscript on the page is a temporary stage between the writer’s imagination and the public performance’⁸. The political upheavals of Margaret Cavendish’s times appear to have precluded the public performance of her published plays, which occupied ‘a temporary stage’ for more than three centuries. My 1999 production of *The Female Academy* was thus a world premiere, a very exciting concept for participating students. Whilst some of the early video footage is uneven and a little shaky, the interpretative outcomes from that first public performance have undoubtedly stood the test of time. I have discussed *The Female Academy* in academic papers at international seventeenth century conferences in the US, Canada and Britain; fellow academics have engaged enthusiastically with the new knowledge and textual insights generated by my students’ experimental work. The shared exploration broke down barriers about expertise and learning, as well as spatial barriers within the lecture theatre. It provided me with important new academic insights and inspired beginning university students to understand that they could contribute to the

creation of knowledge, thereby encouraging their intellectual and creative ambitions. Boyer’s four categories of scholarship⁹ suggest that the most advanced and currently valued form of scholarship, the scholarship of discovery, is least likely to benefit undergraduate learning, particularly at introductory level. My experiment indicates otherwise—first year students’ directed action—research generated a number of important new discoveries about a hitherto neglected text.

The positive outcomes of this experiment, including my National Teaching Fellowship, are almost too many to list. Since 1999, I have developed new skills in digital video production and have filmed extracts from six of Margaret Cavendish’s more than 19 plays with students—each a world premiere. These productions underpin the *Margaret Cavendish Performance Project* which I established to develop this pioneering performance-based research strategy. Barbara Zamorski has investigated students’ varied awareness and perceptions of staff research activity¹⁰. What are the perceptions of those first year students (now graduates), who participated in my early experiment in the holistic integration of research and teaching? Many have indicated that they found it a memorable and confidence-building experience. As initial members of the intellectual and performance community which developed into the *Margaret Cavendish Performance Project*, these students remained exceptionally engaged and well-informed both about academic staff research and about seventeenth century drama by women. A number used institutional structures creatively to rejoin the project at different points in their undergraduate careers, drawing in fellow students as well. For example, some devised work placements or dissertation topics which allowed them to build on their initial interest or experience of Cavendish’s plays. Others suggested new directions for production or initiated new filming

⁸ Charlotte Keatley *My Mother said I never should* (Methuen 1994) p. viii

⁹ See Graham Gibbs ‘Institutional strategies for linking research and teaching’ *Exchange* Issue 3 Autumn 2002 pp 8-11 www.exchange.ac.uk

¹⁰ Barbara Zamorski ‘What do students think about Research?’ *Exchange* Issue 3 Autumn 2002 pp. 21-22 www.exchange.ac.uk

developments. One graduate has worked on Cavendish’s plays as an actor or director every year for the past four years. Another, who returned to the project in her final semester to give a complex and insightful virtuososo cameo screen performance as a would-be female revenger, valued highly the symmetry of being able to begin and end her undergraduate career in the same area.

In conclusion, Cavendish’s bold dramatisation of a proto-feminist university in *The Female Academy* offers a manifesto for persisting with new and radical initiatives regardless of external discouragement or opposition. In this play’s battle of the sexes, the conservative and obstructive men outside the Female Academy are

terrified of innovation and change in education and will go to almost any lengths to prevent the women from studying. Resistance makes them ridiculous; our final first year workshop turned York St John itself into a theatre as we staged the comic cacophony of the male characters in the play blowing trumpets in the central quadrangle outside the lecture theatre, in incoherent and futile attempts to silence the Female Academicians. Time has duly evaluated Cavendish’s eccentric and challenging idea that women might be entitled to university education. I hope the ongoing development of creative and innovative inter-relationships between research and teaching might have a similar outcome.

Student Reading

Philip Martin, Director, English Subject Centre, Royal Holloway, University of London

Following the article in Newsletter 4 (September, 2002) by Jo Gill and Alan Brown, The English Subject Centre Website is currently hosting a discussion about students and reading. To date, the discussion has been developed through the contributions of a limited number of academics, and is of a consistently high order. This part of our site is also being visited regularly by a much higher number of visitors on a ‘read only’ basis (around 275 people to date).

Many departments have concerns about students’ reading, but the discussion to date has not taken the form, simply, of questioning whether students read enough of the right things: rather it is investigating the activity of reading itself, and the structures that surround it.

If you wish to read the discussion, join in, or start another one, then please visit:

<http://english.ltsn.ac.uk/discussion/forum/>

You will find the discussion under the main heading of ‘Teaching and Learning General’ and the sub-heading of ‘About Reading’.

What is a Postgraduate Degree in Creative Writing?

Dr Graeme Harper, of the UK Centre for Creative Writing Research Through Practice¹, University of Wales, Bangor reflects on the nature of the postgraduate degree in Creative Writing.

Education in the writing arts has not changed that much since the birth of the university, though the formalisation of this process within Higher Education has asked us increasingly to reflect on the nature of the ‘subject’ of Creative Writing, and on how such a subject might be taught.

Likewise, the formalising of the relationship between creative writer and the academic literary critic did not come about until relatively recently in the history of the university. As Andrew Delbanco points out in ‘The Decline and Fall of Literature’², the ‘scholar of Scottish and English ballads Francis James Child was appointed to the *first* chair of English literature at Harvard only in 1876; the English honours degree was not established in Oxford until 1894.’ These two things, occurring in tandem, have impacted directly on the construction of postgraduate Creative Writing programmes.

Today, a postgraduate degree in Creative Writing can be a variety of things. It can focus on any genre and be nominally a ‘research degree’ (i.e. an individual project with supervision) or nominally ‘taught’ (i.e. based on units of study or modules of assessment, some of which relate to critical or theoretical issues rather than involving ‘creative practice’—though this split is not maintained in all programmes). Indeed, if nominally ‘taught’, modules of study might be based either on genre, critical or theoretical, cultural or literary, industrial or historical premises.

At their core, postgraduate degrees in Creative Writing, which can be anything from diplomas to doctorates, most often consist of a longer piece of Creative Writing with some ‘response’ to it by the writer, indicating their critical awareness of their own

practice and/or the practice of others, not necessarily only the practice of writers. The ‘response component’ of a postgraduate Creative Writing degree can come in a vast number of modes and with a variety of labels (e.g. ‘critical essay’, ‘dissertation’, ‘reflective essay’, ‘analysis’ and so on).

The difference between one ‘level’ of achievement and another in Creative Writing degrees is most often flagged up by reference to the length of the Creative Writing submission, with Diplomas and Masters level work not usually involving completed longer works (i.e. novels, collections of stories or poetry, full length screenplays and so on). There are variations, however, and there is a fundamental difference between the UK and USA experience.

In the USA, the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree is often considered the ‘exit degree’ (i.e. endorsed as the ‘final’ qualification in the subject) for a creative writer. Thus, although labelled as a ‘Masters’ course, these programmes can involve work of some length. This brings about debate, particularly as PhD programmes in Creative Writing do exist in the USA and have done so now for some time. In light of the wide endorsement of the MFA qualification as an exit route, some have asked: ‘Given the strength and exit profile of MFA courses what is the additional purpose of PhDs in Creative Writing?’ Suffice it to say, the PhD stands alone as the highest qualification in the subject of Creative Writing attainable in the UK, and is certainly available as an exit degree in the USA.

A typical example of what would be required for a research based Creative Writing doctorate in the UK would be: a) the writing of a novel, a collection of short stories or a collection of poetry with b) a critical

¹ Further information on the UK Centre for Creative Writing Research Through Practice can be obtained from g.harper@bangor.ac.uk or r.kerridge@bathspa.ac.uk.

² Andrew Delbanco, ‘The Decline and Fall of Literature’, *New York Review of Books*, November 4th, 1999. The article is available online at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/318>. For responses to this article, see <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/143>.

response of between 20,000 and 50,000 words. For an MA: a) a piece of Creative Writing of between 15,000 and 20,000 words with b) a selection of essays or 'responses' or a 'critical piece' totalling 15,000 to 20,000 words.

These postgraduate submissions can be contrasted with work in an undergraduate module in Creative Writing, perhaps single genre or perhaps thematically, market-orientation or critical-definition based, where the student would either be expected to a) produce a portfolio of work containing pieces of Creative Writing or b) produce an individual creative work accompanied by a discursive piece or c) produce either of these, but also accompany this with earlier draft work or a diary or record of the writing process.

Thus, length of work submitted can only be taken as a guideline and many Creative Writing programmes make the point that there is a need for flexibility in order to cater for a wide variety of possible Creative Writing forms. Similarly, the creative-critical response 'cross-over' in Creative Writing programmes reflects the requirement that a creative writer be aware of their practice, the process of writing, and the practice and processes of writers, the industry or critics of finished Creative Writing. This does not negate creative practice as the core of these programmes, but it does reflect the opportunity Creative Writing learning on campus offers for the development of a writer's craft and of a personal understanding of that craft.

The variety of methods of relating the creative component in a Creative Writing course to the critical response by the writer makes plain that, while the critical response can certainly be much like the critical work of a student undertaking a degree in English, it serves a different purpose, and should not be considered in exactly the same way as critical analysis in the study of English. For one thing, it can often be quite different in pitch, tone and focus, being generated by the student's own Creative Writing and relating back to it.

Whereas at undergraduate level the workshop is the primary mode of delivery of Creative Writing teaching, at postgraduate level there is a relatively even split between one-to-one supervision of Creative Writing students by staff writers and workshopping within a larger Creative Writing course group. In addition, Creative Writing students, across the whole range of degree levels, are often involved in peer generated readings and/or workshops, in reading events involving visiting writers, in meetings with literary agents or other industry people, or in discussions with critics working on contemporary literature, film or theatre. These activities, more or less informal, can be seen as integral parts of the learning process in Creative Writing programmes.

The position of the campus as a place where creative writers can meet those interested in the writing arts actively continues to feed Creative Writing learning, as it has done since the birth of the university. The formalisation of Creative Writing on campus into degree programmes has not adversely affected this positive, informal, activity. What formal degree structures now exist endeavour to maintain a sense of the campus as creative space, drawing on the opportunities for reflection on individual writing practice, providing workshop or one-to-one discussion, and adding to this the opportunity to write, both in direct relation to the market for creative writing of all kinds, and in relation to the pursuit of 'great writing' in and for itself.

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Don't Just Do Something!

Leo D'Agostino, St Mary's University College, Belfast, considers the place and teaching of poetry.

At the heart of Stephen Regan's piece in Issue 2 of the Newsletter, 'Poetry, Please,' I sensed a perennial worry; we know poetry matters, but how on earth do we persuade everyone else that it does, especially how do we persuade those people who have signed up to either study or teach it? Perhaps one of the most sonorous articulations of this worry in the modern period in England comes at the end of F.R. Leavis's ground-breaking study *New Bearings in English Poetry*, first published in 1932: 'So that poetry in the future, if there is poetry, seems likely to matter even less to the world. Those who care about it can only go on caring.' The paradox of Leavis's position was embryonic of nearly everyone who came to write about the subject. On the one hand the book was a living, combative example of the author's passionate commitment to poetry and its importance in our lives. On the other hand it was suffused with gloom as it foresaw the eventual diminution and possible extinction of the (serious) poetry-reading audience. The terms of the debate have scarcely changed since. Embattled minority, indifferent (or worse) majority. We have surely talked the extinction of poetry to death.

English teachers are presumed to be among the embattled minority, the true believers in the possibilities of the poem. But of course they are more than this. They are also the foot-soldiers nominated to take the battle to the chalk-face, the active professors of poetry. The problem, common to all conscripted activists, is that the supposed elite minority is recruited from the suspect majority. Now I have little doubt that most people continue to need poetry and to seek out, even if unconsciously, its satisfactions. The poetry most people connect with, however, takes many and varied forms. Some of my students tell me that the modern post-sixties pop lyric fulfils the same emotional role for them as they imagine the poetry they have to study used to fulfill. If I think about the matter in this way I feel that the same might be said for a pre-sixties Frank Sinatra song with its wonderfully exact yet idiosyncratic phrasings and rhythms.

The point is that the poetry most people read or listen to voluntarily is rarely the poetry which students *have* to read or, I fear, teachers *have* to teach. My own evidence for this is largely anecdotal but voluminous.

While talking about this subject recently to several (non-English specialist) colleagues, two of them suddenly began to recite lines from poems they had learnt 'by heart' at school. Except that there was little heart in the recitations, only the straining to remember. In 'The diversity of poetry: how trainee teachers' perceptions affect their attitudes to poetry teaching' by Rita Ray (*The Curriculum Journal* Vol.10, No.3, Autumn 1999) the answers to two of the questions asked of the forty-eight trainees are worth pondering:

Do you read poetry for pleasure now?

Yes	Occasionally	No
4.2%	33.3%	62.5%

Do you think poetry should be taught in school?

Yes		No
100%		0

So everyone without exception is in favour of virtue but only 4.2% are confident enough to assert that they practise it on a regular basis.

In the areas of how poetry is taught and whether a wide enough range of poetry is read with enough attentiveness for it to be taught effectively, it seems clear that we can take nothing for granted. Many teachers, who might have been considered by the Arnold-Leavis axis to be in the front line in the battle against the philistines, now appear to feel themselves embattled by the requirement to teach poetry at all. And yet the less poetry English teachers seem to read, the more insistent and incessant are the demands that poetry be taught. The demands are being made by every conceivable educational authority; government pronouncements through the National Curriculum, Education Boards, the Inspectorate, the schools.

One of the results of this now chronically dysfunctional situation has been a mushroom cloud of books *about* the teaching of poetry. Not even the most dedicated and statistics-addicted researcher could keep track of all of them. Asked to respond to a request for 'books on the teaching of poetry' Google (the internet search engine) turned up, in 0.16 seconds, 544,000 sites. The books cited place poetry in every conceivable pedagogical context; phonetics, creative writing,

reading, cross-curricular themes, choral reading, body movement, dance, dramatisation. All these contexts now form part of a familiar educational dogma but they may be less than enabling in the unpropitious circumstances in which poetry and its teaching now find themselves. Too many of the available aids and guides to the teaching of poetry concern themselves almost exclusively with what teachers can *do* with a poem; the activities which poems can springboard pupils into; the themes and projects which a poem might ease a class into. Guide books like these are close to being the pedagogical equivalents of recent, theory-driven, academic productions on literature. The effect in each case has been to encourage the teacher or reader to escape as quickly as possible from the poem into other, often fruitful activities or speculation.

I am not suggesting that the activities-approach can or indeed should be entirely reversed. My proposal is a more modest one. In the teaching of poetry the poem is clearly the starting-point. But we may want to consider whether, in at least some lessons, we should also make it the end-point. The declared objective of these lessons would simply be that the poem is listened to and appreciated for what it *is* in its own linguistic terms. To put it another way, I would wish to encourage more teachers and student-teachers to see the poem as a linguistic space in which the teacher feels confident enough to linger before, or instead of, dashing off into the several directions down which he/she is continually being urged to head. To read, to listen, hopefully to appreciate. The outcomes in this deceptively simple process may be regarded by some to be vague and unquantifiable and therefore uncongenial to the drive towards measuring and auditing, but unless we allow for the risky stillness which such a process entails, putting the *poem* centre

stage, then our poetry may continue to be thrilling indeed but its classroom study is always liable to be a diversion.

In Ireland we are fortunate to have witnessed the remarkable flowering of poetry which has taken place over the last thirty years. Tragically it has co-incided, if that is the right word, with times of terrible conflict and violence. The times have been deeply inscribed in the poetry which in turn has self-reflectively and relentlessly interrogated its own status and value when set against the backdrop of the nightmare of history. I can think of no more vital and important resource for a teacher of literature than the poetry and associated criticism which has been produced in Northern Ireland since the 1960s. A recurring anxiety in this body of work is one which has been merely outlined here but which every teacher of poetry cannot fail to be aware of; can a poem be civically responsible and responsive and still remain a *poem*? (See especially Seamus Heaney's 'The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker' in *The Government of the Tongue*, Faber, 1988). Heaney, a distinguished teacher as well as a major poet, has conceded poetry's obligation to address the wider questions of politics and history. At the same time he has remained steadfast in affirming the poem as poem, warning us that 'in discharging this function, poets are in danger of slighting another imperative, namely, to redress poetry *as* poetry, to set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means.' (*The Redress of Poetry*, Faber, 1995).

For the hyper-active teacher of poetry this might translate into the celebrated reversal of Harry Truman's injunction to a lethargic aide: 'Don't just do something – stand there!'

Questions, questions, questions?

The English Subject Centre runs a free enquiry service covering all aspects of the teaching and learning of the subject in UK higher education. If you need some information, advice or support we are here to help you.
Simply e-mail: esc@rhul.ac.uk or telephone 01784 443221.

Life after English

Dr Peter Strachan reflects on how his study of English has contributed to his life and career beyond the discipline.

Peter Strachan graduated from University College, Cardiff in 1977 with first class honours in English Literature. After a year off he started a D.Phil. at Jesus College, Oxford, working on it full-time until 1981 and finally completing it in 1987. After leaving Oxford he became a Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) volunteer in a teacher training college in Egypt and after two years took over the management of the VSO programme in that country. He subsequently worked for Help the Aged (Overseas) in London and then managed the Oxfam programme in western Sudan from 1987 to 1990. Upon his return to the UK he took an M.A. in Social Policy at Brunel University and worked first as a benefits adviser for Age Concern in Waltham Forest, London and then as a Development Officer with the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux (NACAB). In 1998 he joined Coventry City Council as Policy & Planning Manager in the Corporate Policy Team and has since become the City Council's Area Co-ordinator for two of the most deprived wards in the city. In 2001 he completed a Diploma in Management through the Open University Business School and now swears that he will never take another exam for as long as he lives.

The first thing that I'd have to accept is that I've never really tried to make use of my English degree in my career. By the time my research money was running out at Oxford, the only thing I was really clear about was that I no longer wanted to be an academic. I did the public sector bit of the 'milk round' and found very mixed attitudes to my academic background. Generally they liked the First – evidence of either a reasonably sharp mind or, at least, a certain degree of sheer doggedness – but I have no recollection of anyone saying that it gave me the ideal knowledge base for managing a coal mine. The doctorate, not even completed, was the cause of much suspicion and I had to work hard to convince a succession of potential employers that I could take a decision without first spending six months in a library.

Clearly I was successful in convincing the NHS of this as they offered me a place on their fast stream management training scheme, but by that time I'd decided instead to accept a rather less lucrative offer from VSO. Again, it wasn't my degree that interested them, but rather the volunteer adult literacy teaching I'd done during my year off in Cardiff and my campaigning activities with the War on Want and World Development Movement groups in Oxford. The bit of my thesis that did interest them was actually the bit that had least to do with English, as such. My topic involved a lot of theory and this in turn had involved getting up close and personal with a lot of theoretical linguistics. The fact that this meant that I knew the difference between a past perfect verb and an embedding transformation was probably taken into account.

Once I'd arrived in Egypt, I found that my academic background carried far more status than I'd expected. The teacher training college at which I worked in

Upper Egypt was loosely affiliated to the University of Assiut and the staff definitely regarded themselves as academics. They were certainly impressed to have an Oxford doctor in their midst. This is what they'd been led to believe they were getting and as the delusion helped open doors that enabled me to help my students better, I never let on that I hadn't yet completed my thesis. I even delivered an academic paper to a symposium in Cairo on the relevance of discourse analysis to the interpretation of sixteenth century poetry, principally to give a little extra status to VSO as an organisation. Of course, discourse analysis has very little relevance at all to sixteenth century poetry; the most that could be said is that it had rather more than the relevance of this paper to my work teaching remedial English language to Egyptian trainee teachers.

The bluff factor is something that still occasionally remains of value and I'm not above signing a reference letter Dr. Peter Strachan if it will add marginally to the chances of community group getting a grant or a former colleague getting a job they want. At least I'm now entitled to do this! More recently, I have found my ability to talk knowledgeably about the poetry of W.B. Yeats to be extremely helpful in striking up a good working relationship with the current Leader of Coventry City Council. But otherwise, as with any other degree subject, my collection of bits of paper was soon eclipsed by my actual work experience in the eyes of prospective employers.

So what did I (and society) get out of my six years studying Eng. Lit. – and, of course, spending several thousand pounds of taxpayers' money? I'm profoundly grateful to have taken my first degree at Cardiff. At the time, Cardiff was developing a reputation for pioneering approaches to English Literature that were

still regarded as a little outlandish in many universities, where Bradley and Leavis still ruled the roost. Cardiff emphasised skills over knowledge and encouraged its students to develop their thinking within a sound theoretical framework. Depth of reading was prized over breadth, literary history was considered to be of relatively low priority and value judgements were positively discouraged. Instead I was schooled in reading critically, in becoming highly aware of language and its effects and in developing arguments that were based on evidence rather than assertion. I was also encouraged to think critically about the various theoretical standpoints on offer and to explore the ways in which this theory could be applied to help cast light on practical criticism (I use the term in both its general and technical senses). These are skills that have continued to inform my work over the years.

The habits of using theoretical tools to analyse practical problems and of developing clear and well supported written arguments are ones that have proved essential in many contexts. These range from making a written case for a grant to Oxfam's senior management five thousand miles away from my base in west Sudan to formulating and evaluating policy options for elected Councillors in Coventry. As a manager, I never cease to be depressed at the poor quality of written English displayed by even fairly senior colleagues. If a graduate in English leaves college with nothing more than the ability to write prose that can be published in a newsletter with little amendment, then that is a skill upon which many senior managers would now place a considerable premium.

I'm far less convinced that the taxpayer got value for money from my doctoral research. Indeed, I have come to believe that there's very little point in doing a doctorate in the majority of subjects unless the student is intending to enter the academic world. The research skills that I learned have been of little value to me since Oxford, and I was grateful to have had them replaced

by a far more valuable set of social research skills as a part of my studies for my M.A. in Social Policy. As for the 'original and substantial contribution to knowledge' that I'm considered to have made, I strongly suspect that the last people to read my thesis were the two academics who examined me upon it fifteen years ago. I don't generally use the title in my working life as I don't especially want to draw attention to the three least relevant years of my life to what I now do for a living. For alternative viewpoints on the value of study at postgraduate level see 'Doctoral Futures: career destinations of arts and humanities research students' published by the Council of University Deans of Arts and Humanities in December 2002, and also English Subject Centre Report no.3, *Postgraduate Training in Research Methods: Current Practice and Future Needs in English*, Sadie Williams, February 2003.

In terms of personal development, my first degree also gave me the space and a framework for thinking about life, the universe and everything. Again, the Cardiff emphasis on the value of theory was important here – a more traditional university at that time would not have made the links with politics, linguistics, society and ideologies about which students in Cardiff were encouraged to think.

And it did give me three years in which to develop what has remained an enduring personal love. My most recent collection of holiday reading included *Coriolanus* and my Filofax has pages of favourite extracts from poets from George Herbert to Seamus Heaney to which I frequently return to help restore a sense of perspective at the end of a frustrating day.

My old headteacher at Middlesbrough High School, himself an English graduate, used to say that there's not much you can do with an English degree but a whole lot that society can do with an English graduate. I suppose I've been spending the last quarter century confirming the truth of that observation.

Supporting Writing Skills: the Royal Literary Fund Scheme and other Initiatives

Dr Siobhán Holland, English Subject Centre, Royal Holloway, University of London, reviews the factors contributing to the success of the Royal Literary Fund scheme for supporting writing skills.

Since 1999, the Royal Literary Fund (RLF) has appointed creative writers to posts in HE institutions where they have worked with staff and students to develop writing skills. The scheme has been hugely successful and although it is not focused on contacts with English departments, a large number of the fellows, and the writers working in the new project fellows scheme, have worked closely with colleagues in English and Creative Writing.

In January 2003 the English Subject Centre hosted a symposium which explored the conditions which have made the scheme successful in English departments. It also considered the range of strategies for improving basic and academic literacy which are being explored not only through the RLF scheme but through the departmental projects funded by the Subject Centre.

In the course of the event it became clear that a number of factors help to promote success in fellowship schemes. Of greatest importance is the need for an RLF fellow to have an effective relationship with his or her academic mentor. The mentor should take responsibility for introducing the fellow to relevant procedures and practices within a department and, more broadly, in the host institution. The mentor should also play a key role in informing colleagues and students about the fellow's role and responsibilities. This might involve the mentor in helping the fellow to develop appropriate and successful publicity material for distribution to students and staff throughout an institution, or in devising a programme for introducing fellows to students in person. At Oxford Brookes, the RLF fellow attends the student Freshers' Fayre and sends out a letter to all academic departments while at Queen Mary's, the RLF fellow's work is introduced in lectures on study skills.

A good relationship with a mentor will help an RLF fellow to become a visible and active part of departmental and institutional life but other practical factors will also affect the fellow's relationship with staff and students. At Anglia Polytechnic University

(APU) the fellow, Sally Cline, has an office which is located in the centre of the department and this physical location has played an important role in the integration process. At APU, where the SpeakWrite project has been encouraging students to develop their writing skills for a number of years, lecturers feel that the fellow also benefits from operating in a departmental culture which emphasises that writing skills are central to the English programme and are not treated through 'bolt on' or remedial measures.

While it is important for fellows to be included fully in the life of their host institution, it is also crucial to their success that they maintain an identity which is seen to be 'outside' the structures and hierarchies of academic programmes. For students, part of the freedom they experience in discussing difficulties with fellows is predicated on the fact that the fellows are not implicated in the process of setting and marking assignments. The independence of the fellowship from academic programmes encourages students to express anxieties and explore solutions that they might not be willing to discuss with lecturers involved directly in grading their work. Of course, the process of consulting with a wide range of students on a programme will often mean that the fellow develops insights into the strengths of, and gaps in, existing provision and can therefore provide useful feedback on general issues that emerge.

Fellows and academics stress the need to clarify the scheme's purpose and to emphasise the importance of students developing their own creativity and independent study skills during their contact with the fellow. Problems can develop if students are allowed to develop a sense that they are dependent on the support of an RLF fellow, either for their academic success or for their personal wellbeing. While fellows were positive about the role they can play in enhancing students' self-esteem they sought to avoid any kind of counselling role. Fellows should therefore be involved in the same kinds of referral procedures used by academic colleagues (for further details on student

support structures, see the 'Disability Issues' page on the English Subject Centre website).

A number of fellows have adapted the initial systems they set up for students to book appointments in order to encourage students to use the scheme flexibly rather than regularly. In one department, in the first year of the RLF programme, students were able to book sessions as often as they wished and 80 students attended regularly, on average meeting the fellow 9 or 10 times each. In the second year, the system was changed to offer students a range of bookable time slots (from 10 minutes to an hour) as well as writing clinics which operate on a queuing system.

As Mario Petrucci, Project Fellow at Oxford Brookes, pointed out during the event, many of the problems students encounter when they write essays derive from the fact that they have learnt to think about writing as a non-creative process. Students have often come to associate success in writing with careful adherence to 'rules' rather than with experimentation and the opportunity for contact with a creative writer who is engaged in writing as a creative practice can be immensely helpful. For the Royal Literary Fund fellows, the scheme offers an opportunity for them to work in a community engaged with writing. It also offers them valuable opportunities to reflect on their own practice and assumptions about writing. The success of the scheme as a positive opportunity for writers is clear in the continued contact that a number of fellows have retained with the scheme and the institutions in which they were placed.

The success of the RLF scheme has led to a number of English departments retaining their links with the scheme after the first fellow's tenure has ended. In the long term, departments will need to work to ensure that changes in personnel do not disrupt incremental developments or undermine progress that has been made. Steve Cook of the Royal Literary Fund stresses the need for lecturers to develop the 'institutional memory of the scheme' so that valuable insights are not lost. As new Royal Literary Fund fellows are appointed in the spring to posts that begin in the

following autumn, there is time available for departing fellows and departmental staff to establish an efficient handover process.

The remit of the fund is not to support English departments alone. Nevertheless, as the project has developed, links with English departments have proved successful and this has contributed to the continued interest, at subject level, in the potential of the scheme. It has also allowed departments to develop interests evident in other areas of their activities. At Oxford Brookes, for example, where lecturers are part of a research centre on contemporary poetry, poets have been selected for the role of RLF fellow. In other departments, the fellow offers support not just to students but to academics who are engaged in their own professional and creative writing practices.

Interest in issues related to the development of academic literacy, fluency and creativity is evident in the project work being undertaken by lecturers involved in the English Subject Centre's departmental project scheme. At the Royal Literary Fund event, Dr Susan Bruce from the University of Keele outlined the work she is doing through her 'Write Through the Semester' project which encourages students to reflect on their own writing practices and those of their peers. Dr Jonathan Worley of St. Mary's University College, Belfast, discussed the peer mentoring scheme he and his colleague, Dr Matthew Martin are using which involves students in tutoring each other (For details of departmental projects, see <http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/projects/deptprojects/index.htm>). It is likely that discussions about basic and academic literacy as well as creativity in the writing process are going to retain their currency in the subject communities which are involved in teaching English Language, Literature and Creative Writing. The Royal Literary Fund, its fellows and departmental staff involved with the RLF scheme are in an excellent position to inform and develop these debates.

For further details of the RLF scheme see <http://www.rlf.org.uk>