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Article:

Developing Graduate Skills through Studying Seventeenth-Century Literature: Some Reflections

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Abstract

This paper advocates for the use of learner-centred teaching activities and enquiry-based assessment through reflection on the organisation of a FHEQ Level 5 seventeenth-century English literature module. While English is a subject where, traditionally, students find it difficult to recognise and articulate their transferable skills, this paper explores how embedding such activities equips students with a range of transferable skills and attributes which, in turn, contributes to the sustainability agenda. The paper also reflects on some of the issues that arise for staff and students when students are required to take on increased responsibility for their learning.

Keywords

Teaching literature; employability; sustainability; problem-based learning

Context and Objectives

The 2015 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's 'Subject Benchmark Statement' for English states that, as well as more subject specific skills such as an 'understanding of verbal creativity and aesthetic features of literary and non-literary texts', the ability to 'recognise and utilise the expressive resources of language', and the ability to reflect on 'the history of textual production and reception' (QAA 2015, 5), graduates who have studied English should also be 'effective researchers, good communicators and active learners. They contribute to society and are highly sought after by employers' (QAA 2015, 3.3, 7). However, English is sometimes wrongly derided for being a degree subject where students develop a very specific, niche set of skills that are of limited use beyond university study; of pursuing 'knowledge solely for knowledge's sake'. In a context where the discipline is experiencing broader challenges to course recruitment (Eaglestone and Kovesi 2013), English tutors need to continue to confront this perception of their students as just 'people who read', emphasising that English graduates possess an excellent ability to process complex information and synthesise it, develop critical perspectives, and respond to tasks with creativity and imagination (QAA 2015, 3.4, 7). Indeed, we now have 'hard data' to support the claim that beyond the subject's 'intrinsic merit' and ability 'to reveal the truths about society and the human condition', a 'Humanities education is of great

value beyond academia, giving a special grounding for a wide range of careers' (Kreager 2013, 1). English as a discipline is transformative: it requires students to think critically about the presentation of different cultural, economic, historical backgrounds, and 'generate[s] shifts in the perspectives and frames of reference of learners, as well as their beliefs, attitudes and reactions' (Robinson 2016). Society needs graduates that can produce nuanced responses to societal issues, whether they become teachers or policy makers. In order to continue to address negative perceptions of English degrees, we, as tutors, need to make sure that we are doing our best to help students develop these skills and attributes, but also make sure that they recognise and articulate them to potential employers. One way of doing this, I argue below, is to embed learning activities that are more representative of real-world tasks as part of the course's overall assessment portfolio.

For this paper I will reflect on and evaluate a research-led module that I teach as part of the English programme, 'Revolution and Restoration: Literature of the Civil War and Restoration', and think more about how such a historically specific module (in this case focusing on English literature from the period c.1640-1700) can do more to enhance key subject specific skills, as well as contributing to students' employability and their ability to 'examine critically policies, ideas, concepts, and systems' in their life to come (Knight 2005). The paper will advocate for the use of 'learner-centred' and 'enquiry-based' learning and assessment opportunities as part of its consideration of sustainability issues and transferable skills development in designing and delivering English programmes.

Module description

'Revolution and Restoration' is currently an FHEQ Level 5, 15-credit optional core module on the Keele University English Programme. As the aims of the module state, it is 'designed to introduce students to the range of literary texts produced in the period of the English Civil War and its aftermath'. However, the module also 'aims to develop students' ability to analyse the inter-relation of literary and political cultures' as well as developing 'students' skills in literary analysis, in contextualisation of texts, and in textual editing'. As a Level 5 second semester module, it is designed in order to encourage advanced research skills to prepare students for their independent research project (dissertation) that they will begin at FHEQ Level 6. The intended learning outcomes for this module support these aims:

Students who successfully complete the module will

- demonstrate detailed knowledge of literature produced between c. 1640 and 1700 and its historical, social, and cultural contexts (Assessments 1, 2, and 3);
- analyse literary and non-literary texts effectively, and integrate this analysis into their critical writing (Assessments 1, 2, and 3);

- demonstrate enhanced research skills in electronic and traditional media (Assessments 1, 2, and 3);
- use critical and contextual sources effectively, and understand key scholarly debates in this area (Assessments 1, 2, and 3);
- develop and structure arguments effectively in a variety of written forms (Assessments 1, 2, and 3);
- articulate initial responses to texts and react sensitively to the responses of other students (Assessment 1);
- edit and annotate primary texts in line with scholarly protocols (Assessment 2);
- use appropriate scholarly referencing systems and present written work in a professional manner (Assessments 1, 2, and 3).

There are three assessments on the module that assess these ILOs:

(1) Contributions to KLE discussion threads posted on a module forum (20%): Three discussion threads are set up for each week's text(s) on the KLE to which students are asked to post at least two messages (totalling between 100 and 200 words) in advance of the lecture. These posts will record their reactions to the texts and responses to other students' reactions.

(2) Editing exercise (30%): Students produce an edition of a short piece of writing, of around 1,000 words, from the period 1630-1700, which they will source from the database *EEBO* (*Early English Books Online*). They are required to edit the text, annotate it with explanatory notes (of around 200-300 words), and write an introduction of 500-600 words, explaining its literary and/or historical significance.

(3) Researched essay (50%): Students choose one topic from a list and write a researched essay of 2,000 words. The assessment is submitted in Week 13. The module is taught by a 1-hour lecture and 1-hour seminar each week. Lectures are delivered by a teaching team and student uptake can vary between 20-50 students.

Teaching for sustainability

In the introduction to this piece of work I quoted Peter Knight's article for *The Guardian* where he is critical of HEFCE's bulletin on Sustainable Education because he believed it to be advocating teaching according to a particular political orthodoxy. In the quotation I picked, he suggests what university teaching should be doing: to 'examine critically policies, ideas, concepts, and systems' (Knight 2005). However, I would associate what Knight is suggesting with teaching for sustainability, which includes facilitating the education of students to that they can go on to make

informed, and nuanced decisions rather than being told what to think. As Wals and Jickling have argued, university teaching should 'allow [students] to critique, construct and act with a high degree of autonomy and self-determination, if not in their personal lives then at least in their professional lives' (Wals and Jickling 2002, 224). Clearly, then, in order to design sustainability in their modules, university tutors need to place the emphasis on teaching, learning, and assessment methods that encourage students to develop critical thinking skills, to explore different world views (cultural, political, historical), and to engage with these using appropriate critical frameworks. Wals and Jickling explain this when they suggest that 'to educate for sustainability is not necessarily educational when sustainability is fixed, pre- and expert determined (i.e. academics) and to be reproduced by novices (i.e. students)' (2002, 224). Two of their recommendations to educate for sustainability, therefore, include shifting from 'teacher-centered to learner-centered arrangements', and 'from sheer knowledge accumulation to problematic issue orientation' (2002, 229). Clearly, then, discussions about the issues on the module, and the texts that explore them, need to be set up to encourage this kind of engagement.

In many ways, 'Revolution and Restoration' is a module that is, by its nature, well-suited to enhancing students' knowledge about important political and cultural issues. The arguments about the political system that were going on during the English Civil War period are key issues that still present changes in today's world: how accountable should those in power be to those they govern? Who should have a say in how the country is run? Is spilling blood in the interests of revolution ever justified? Is the equality of all men and women possible/desirable? Even if we are atheists, is it possible to identify/empathise with people who believe that God supports their political ideology? How are literary texts exploring and engaging with these important questions? Students are very interested in these issues and want the chance to explore these in an intellectual environment. On being asked why they had chosen the module on the discussion forum in the first week, many students responded that they wanted to know more about these kinds of issues. For instance, one student said: 'I have always had a great interest in the ways in which our Parliament influenced cultural and societal aspects of British Life. Not only am I able to study these aspects in detail on this module, but I believe it to be an important part of our history to explore' (Student, 26 January 2016). The module is set up in order to encourage these kinds of debates. Although the module is organised chronologically to help students make sense of the complex political debates and changes, it includes texts written in a range of genres (e.g. poems, masques, plays, treatises, prophecies) written by authors with lots of different political, religious, and gendered perspectives. As well as texts that have received a wealth of critical attention (e.g. Milton's biblical epic, *Paradise Lost*, and Dryden's political allegory, *Absalom and Achitophel*), we also study texts that have only received attention in the last twenty or so years (texts by women writers, and religious radicals). Assessment 2, the editing task, also encouraged students to engage with non-canonical texts and/or texts that traditionally might be called 'non-literary', such as pamphlets, prophecies, and satires. The students were asked to edit these texts and provide an

introduction, using knowledge and skills that they'd developed on the module which encouraged them to engage with the issues these writers encountered and how this affected their published works. Students were not given the 'expert's view' of the texts, so they were forced to evaluate the texts' perspectives for themselves. Also, by introducing students to the electronic database *Early English Books Online*, which contains facsimiles of almost all texts published 1500-1700 in Britain, during this process, students' understanding of what characterises literature of the seventeenth-century was extended (rather than it being dominated by 'white, male' canonical writers like Shakespeare and Milton).

Teaching methods on the module encouraged this 'enquiry-based' (Hutchings and O'Rourke 2006) approach to learning through 'problematic issue orientation' (Wals and Jickling 2002, 229). For FHEQ Level 5 a lecture is necessary to orientate students in necessary contexts and issues, though many lectures also built in interactivity. Seminars, however, were more student-led, where I guided discussion by posing questions and directing students to particular passages, though I do like to keep my plan flexible so that if an issue/question is raised, then we have time to explore this. For instance, in the first class on the module where we looked at a poem framing Charles I's execution as 'murder' (a problematic word because Charles had been tried before a court and found guilty, but the lawfulness of that court was questioned), a student exclaimed that the Puritans (under Cromwell) were 'unhinged, unbalanced fundamentalists' and that Charles was, as the poem suggests, a kind of martyr. The student had been swayed by the poem's use of emotive language, so we talked about what Charles was accused of, whether it was possible to see the other side of the argument (and we were able to re-visit this question later on the module when we looked at more radical Puritan writers). Cotton and Winter suggest, with reference to their investigations, that 'group discussions are frequently mentioned by both school teachers and lecturers when asked to describe an appropriate pedagogy for sustainability [...] the use of discussion may be an attempt to counteract the risk of the tutor taking a transmissive or authoritarian approach, thereby enabling students to discuss their own and others' views' (2010, 46). I saw my approach in this instance as helping the student, and the whole group, air their views of this issue and how it was being presented in verse, while helping them towards a more nuanced view of the situation, and what role language plays in such debates.

Thinking critically about different forms of power, political and belief systems, and literary techniques for exploring these, is tested through the ILOs for this module (it would be difficult to write a nuanced essay without a detailed engagement with such issues), and engage students in the kinds of debates that are not so different to those in today's society (surrounding free speech, social justice, and the place of religion). We cannot (and indeed should not, I would argue) assess students on whether their values have changed over the course of the module. This would suggest that certain values are 'right' and would see education as 'prescriptive' or 'utilitarian' rather than 'emancipatory' (Wals and Jickling 2002, 224). However, when I was marking students' final essays (Assessment 3), I was struck by how many of

them had developed ways of capturing and reflecting on these debates in nuanced ways, avoiding judging writers according to modern perceptions.

Assessing through enquiry-based learning

As I stated earlier, the QAA 'Subject Benchmark Statement' for English states that graduates should be 'versatile researchers', able to 'synthesize complex information and diverse evidence', and 'test, interpret and analyse information and evidence independently and critically' (2015, 3.4, 7). Colleagues across the programme have observed that students often struggle when tackling big research essays, particularly the Level 6 8-10,000-word dissertation, and we need, therefore, to work on ways to build up students' ability to conduct meaningful research and synthesise this and their chosen literary texts and/or adaptations. This was the reason that we designed an editing task for this Level 5 module. Such 'learning strategies are underpinned by the concept of Enquiry Based Learning' (Raby 2010), a concept which has proved effective for teachers of English from earlier historical periods (Hutchings 2012; Hutchings and O'Rourke 2002; 2006). I found Hutchings and O'Rourke's 2002 article, 'Problem-Based Learning in Literary Studies', especially useful in its approach to thinking about the effectiveness of the learning strategies on the module. Hutchings reflects on whether his teaching (direction towards a specific answer with the use of specified reading) fits with his own notions of his own 'principles of literary scholarship':

1. Has Bill encouraged exploratory research?
2. Has Bill encouraged students to students to explore a variety of interpretative contexts in order to allow them to develop their own sense of what is appropriate?
3. Has Bill encouraged an active and creative engagement of the students with the creative power of the literature? (Hutchings and O'Rourke 2002, 76)

The writers reflect on these questions following the 'critical incident' and decide that Hutchings has not encouraged students to do any of these things: he has prescribed the reading and therefore the students' reading methodology. Although his students achieved good marks, the authors conclude that his teaching operated 'according to principles that are the exact opposite of those that inform true literary scholarship' (77). Students should, with appropriate guidance, be encouraged to conduct their own exploratory research and develop their own sense of what kinds of approach are important for studying different texts. The tutor, rather than directing the nature of study, sets up a 'problem' for students, to which they have to decide how to respond – one such problem the authors suggest in their 2006 article is to produce an edition of a text in a group, transcribing the text, adding appropriate footnotes, and writing an introduction to it for an educated reader, a very similar assignment to the one we set on 'Revolution and Restoration'.

Constructing an assessment where students cannot help but undertake enquiry-based research (we had not studied the texts in class, I had not told students how to 'read' the texts, and I had equipped them with 'tools' for research, rather than set reading), meant that they were forced to more actively engage with the texts than they might if they had been writing a directed essay. They also would have struggled to avoid fulfilling the module ILO: 'to demonstrate enhanced research skills in electronic and traditional media'. Students were introduced for the first time to the databases *Oxford English Dictionary Online* and *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (accessible through a local library card), to *Early English Books Online* (accessible with a Keele password), and open-access tools like *Bible Gateway* and the *British Civil Wars Project* website. I set them similar task before the week 5 workshop so that they could see how far they got without these resources, and then show them how these resources could help them in the workshop. This is an example of how the ILOs, assessment, and teaching and learning activities are constructively aligned (Biggs and Tang 2011), and ongoing tutor assessment of support with vary as cohorts change.

As Hutchings and O'Rourke point out, 'the question of how students can be helped to acquire the skills of research and knowledge retrieval necessary for their autonomous learning' (2002, 86) is something that needs careful consideration, especially when increased student autonomy sometimes leads to increased student anxiety. Since I have been teaching the module, I have tried to allay such fears with some model editions produced by previous cohorts, of varying quality, so that students know what they are aiming for though their text is different. Although there would be some benefit to letting students evaluate what an edition should look like from a clear brief (a task not dissimilar to tasks allotted in the workplace), providing a model is a compromise to ensure that they are focusing on the research and content, rather than small details of presentation. In almost all cases, students write feedback suggesting that, even though the task was challenging and different, they felt a great deal of accomplishment and could see how the skills they had developed had real-world value. Framing this kind of assessment in a 'real-world' problem, as Hutchings does in the examples he uses in his eighteenth-century literature class (Hutchings and O'Rourke 2006, 8), certainly helps students to conceptualise the task and recognise its value.

Conclusions

This paper has presented some reflections on framing teaching activities and assessments with an eye not only for developing students' subject-specific knowledge and skills, but, more broadly, enhance their ability to scrutinise and shape 'policies, ideas, concepts, and systems' (Knight 2005) integral to the world we inhabit. It has advocated for 'learner-centred' teaching activities and 'enquiry-based' assessment as an integral part of a portfolio of teaching and assessment practices which prepares students for life after university. Framing such teaching modes in 'real-world' terms can help to diffuse some of the anxiety around activities where

students bear more responsibility, but the pay-off for students and society more generally is worth the careful planning and management that underpins such practices.

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