

Beyond English Literature A Level: The silence of the seminar?

A study of an undergraduate literary theory seminar

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Abstract

This paper presents data from a doctoral study of the relationships between A Level English Literature and university English, a study which examines the experiences of one class of first year university English students. It argues that, whilst the socio-cultural emphases of literary study in the university have the potential to offer a great deal to students, full attention to the interplay between curriculum and pedagogy, and an understanding of the values and assumptions which students and lecturers bring to the literature classroom, are vital if students are to be genuinely engaged in the theoretical aspects of the discipline.

Keywords

A Level, higher education, post-16, English Literature, transition, curriculum, pedagogy, values, literary theory

Changing A Level

The research project on which this paper reports is set against the background of a history of curriculum change in 16–19 English dating back to the Schools Council ‘English 16–19’ Project in the 1970s (Dixon, 1979) and culminating in recent re-shaping of A Level English in 2000 and 2008.

Dixon’s work suggested that current (1970s) A Level provision in English in the UK (at the time, only A Level English Literature, in a form which had changed little since the 1950s) no longer provided a suitable scenario for progression from secondary English. From this starting point, a series of radical changes to and experiments within the A Level English curriculum took place in the 1980s, influenced partly by major changes in literary and linguistic studies in the universities, and partly by radical reformulations of the mainstream school English curriculum, both of which had been taking place since the 1960s. These changes included the establishment of A Levels in English Language, Media Studies, and Communications, as well as a series of experiments – in the form of ‘alternative syllabuses’ – with the shape and content of the A Level English Literature course.

At the same time, and against a background of political controversy about the role of literature in the National Curriculum, this journal, *English in Education*, *Use of English* and the *English and Media Magazine* carried long-running debates about the nature and constitution of A Level English, a debate which was taken up in Patrick Scott’s 1989 book *Reconstructing A Level English*. By 1990, views on A Level English Literature had fallen loosely into three camps (Snapper, 2007a). First, there was a *conservative* position which argued for the retention of a traditional canonical approach to literary study, along Leavisite lines. Second, there was a *liberal* position which retained a Leavisite focus but championed democratising elements such as extended coursework and a broadening of the canon, all of which had featured in the ‘Alternative Syllabuses’ which had operated following Dixon’s recommendations. Finally, there was a *radical* position, which suggested that a liberal reconstruction was not enough: rather, English at A Level needed to take to its heart a series of radical ideas about the nature of culture and textual interpretation which had now become mainstream, through literary theory, in many university English departments. This debate was unceremoniously quashed in the years following the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989 as the Conservative government sought to take control of coverage of the national heritage in the curriculum; in 1993 legislation brought the experiment with alternative syllabuses to an untimely end.

Ideas about the need for a greater coherence between A Level and university English re-surfaced a few years later as part of the new Labour

government's moves to modernise A Levels (Curriculum 2000) and to engage universities in creating stronger links between secondary and higher education (Snapper, 2007b). In consultation with representatives of HE English, QCA published criteria for A Level English Literature in Curriculum 2000 which attempted to introduce a greater emphasis on ideas about context and interpretation in literary study – a move that coincided with the publication of Robert Eaglestone's significant book *Doing English* (2000) about the gap (in relation to theoretical and conceptual aspects of literary studies) between A Level and University English. The new A Level course was only partially successful for a number of reasons (Atherton, 2003, 2004) but has recently been shored up by QCA's revision of the criteria for new A Level courses, which began this year (2008/09) and in which a significant modernisation of approaches to literary study has been central (NATE Post-16 Committee, 2007).

Researching the post-16 English classroom

As a teacher of both A Level and International Baccalaureate courses, I had become convinced that A Level English Literature needed a radical reformulation to broaden its scope, strengthen its theoretical framework, and re-align it with the modern discipline of English in HE. In particular, I was concerned with the way in which the A Level Literature course failed to make explicit for students the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of literary studies or to open up these frameworks for discussion by students, but rather focused exclusively on a rather narrow form of literary appreciation (NATE Post-16 Committee, 2005; Snapper, 2006). Against the background of Curriculum 2000, I wanted to explore further the workings of A Level English Literature, the relationship between A Level English Literature and HE English, and, in particular, the potential of modern conceptions of literary study, as practised in HE, for broadening the curriculum and opening up new and significant ways of engaging students in A Level English Literature.

Whilst the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of debate about the Post-16 literature curriculum have been well rehearsed in previous years, I found that there is remarkably little published research into the actualisation of that curriculum in the classroom, and thus little evidence about the ways in which students and teachers actually engage with those frameworks.¹ The research project I embarked upon therefore sought to add to our knowledge in this area.

The multi-layered case study which formed the core of my project examined the experience of lecturers and students in a first year university course at one university. Data – relating to one class of students, and gathered on a weekly basis during the course of one academic year – consisted of observations of all the class's core

seminars and lectures, and interviews with each of the class's lecturers, with a focus group of students drawn from the class, and with individual students from that focus group. The research took place in an English department in a well-regarded 'new' university, in which the average student A Level grade profile was B grade; the class, which consisted of 20 students, was typical of first year undergraduate classes in this university.

Although the field work for this project took place entirely in a university, and analysis of the data inevitably focused to a considerable extent on the experience of students and lecturers in the *university*, a major concern of the project – reflected in its research questions and instruments – was to examine the *transition* between A Level and HE English, and to explore issues of curriculum and pedagogy at both A Level and HE. My concerns as a researcher reflected my professional status and experiences as a teacher of secondary (including A Level) English; indeed the decision to conduct a study of a university class rather than an A Level class was deliberately aimed at achieving a cross-phase perspective. The central focus of the research was an examination of the challenges facing students and lecturers in relation to the *theoretical and conceptual* content of Post-16 English, which I had identified as a key issue in transition from A Level.

In the discussion which follows, I draw on data which emerged from the study, focusing particularly on extracts from a transcript of one of the class's seminars in order to raise issues about the nature of Post-16 literary study. My focus is on the nature of the classroom transactions between students and teachers, and the ways in which those transactions resonate with broader issues of curriculum and pedagogy in Post-16 English.

A first year English course

In their first year, all English Studies students attended only one English core module session each week. This consisted of two hour-long lectures and one 50-minute long seminar in Module One ('Language, Literature and Discourse', first term only), and one hour-long lecture and one 50-minute long seminar in Module Two ('Texts, Problems and Approaches', second and third terms). The core modules were the only English modules offered in the first year.² These two broad introductory modules were intended as an introductory approach designed to 'bridge the gap' by covering groundwork and preparing students for the fuller study of literature in the second and third years.

Module 1 - language for literature

The first module – 'Language, Literature, Discourse' – consisted of a study of basic sentence grammar, poetic form, and language variety,

and the differences between spoken and written language. The rationale behind this module was to give students a set of basic linguistic tools with which to approach textual analysis, and a linguistic context in which to understand literature as a social discourse. In particular, the module (as the head of department explained in an introductory lecture) was intended to give students a grounding in poetic form and grammatical structure, as these are elements of the subject which students were expected to be inadequately prepared for at A Level.

In deliberately adopting a type of content and structure which was quite different from that of A Level Literature, but avoiding an immediate confrontation with literary theory, the module apparently aimed to help students adjust to the idea that the concerns and methods of literary study at university might be different from those of A Level, at the same time as equipping them with some technical knowledge. Lecturers pitched material effectively at students' level of technical knowledge, the material was often interesting and accessible, and there is no doubt that students' awareness of a range of linguistic issues was increased. The core set text for the module – in addition to a collection of Caribbean poetry – was Rob Pope's *English Studies Book* (1998) a highly accessible introduction to English Studies, from which readings about the nature of the subject were set, in addition to readings about technical linguistic issues. Discussion in the seminars, however, was focused almost exclusively on exercises relating to technical linguistic content. Thus, while the module deliberately steered away from the dominant A Level style of detailed textual study and open discussion of meanings, it also kept implicit a set of meta-cognitive questions concerning the purpose, value and nature of literature and literary study, and a set of questions about the rationale behind this particular approach to literary study, so different from that which students would have experienced previously. Given the very particular nature of this module – ground-laying and technical – I hoped that much of its significance would become clear and more concrete for students in the second module.

Module 2 - literary theory

The second module was entitled 'Texts, Problems and Approaches'. Essentially, this was an introduction to literary theory, supported by readings of a number of substantial literary texts, covering a range of genres, cultures and periods, and ranging from centrally canonical to mainstream contemporary texts. The core set text was *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Rivkin and Ryan, 1998). Set readings from this anthology were interspersed with set literary texts – *Othello* (Shakespeare), *Frankenstein* (Mary Shelley), *The Mill on the Floss* (George Eliot), *The*

Waste Land (T. S. Eliot), *Cloud Nine* (Caryl Churchill), and *The Bluest Eye* (Toni Morrison).

In this module, the emphasis of the course moved onto literary interpretation and the study of literary texts, with a particular emphasis on literary theory. Given the highly technical and language-based nature of the first module, with very little conventional literature work, this was for most students in a sense a starting point for the study of literature at degree level, and thus of particular interest for this study. This module more clearly picked up where A Level left off than the first module.

Approaching literary theory: Lectures

Lectures formed the basis of the module, and each week directly preceded the seminar, which was intended as a follow-up session to the lecture. Each lecture had a discrete topic – either a set text or a theory – and was presented by a different lecturer. The order of the lecture topics contained a clear logic. The opening lecture was an introduction to the module by the module co-ordinator, who explained that the course was intended to build on the skills of textual analysis that the students had acquired at A Level, but also to move them onto a more theoretical approach to the making of meaning, and to challenge certain ‘assumptions acquired through schooling’. Moving on to an introduction to Formalism, he attempted to demonstrate the limited value of ‘off-the-page’ formalist readings. The second week’s lecture tackled formalism more fully; here, the lecturer made it explicit that she equated formalism to a great extent with the dominant approach at A Level Literature, describing it as the theory that ‘provides the nearest fit to [their] assumptions’. From here, students would go on to look at more difficult and unfamiliar theory. Structuralism came next, followed by Cultural Materialism, Feminism, Discourse Theory, Gender Theory and finally Post-Colonialism – a straightforward run-through of different theories.

The lectures on theories alternated with the lectures on set texts, with each text clearly paired with an appropriate theory (*Mill on the Floss* with Gender, *Othello* with Cultural Materialism, etc.). The selection of texts was perhaps designed to give students some comfort in an unfamiliar theoretical landscape through its resemblance to a typical A Level programme. As in many A Level courses, too (at least until the recent new specifications), there was a historical spread of texts, but no attempt to set them chronologically or by genre in an overview of literary history or form: the organising principle of the course was a sequence of *literary theories* rather than the development, historical or generic, of *literature*.

Approaching literary theory: Seminars

Seminars in this module were led by one lecturer in the first term and taken over, due to unforeseen circumstances, by a different lecturer in the second term. The seminars were more dialogic than in the first module, as the subject matter shifted from matters of technical linguistics to questions of theory and interpretation. Despite the increased opportunities for discussion, however, students were often unresponsive, and lecturers tended to 'fill in' with their own comment. Both lecturers attempted to draw out students' responses, using different techniques, but substantial dialogue never developed, and there were frequently uncomfortable silences. Where students were asked to comment freely on their responses to or thoughts about a literary set text, some were reasonably confident, but as soon as the discussion moved away from a discourse about the characters, themes and events in a text, the social contexts of the fictive world of the text, or straightforward observations about a text's style or structure, into more theoretical or abstract areas, almost all students seemed to lack confidence and to be unwilling to contribute. Even during the more successful periods of discussion in class, the vast majority of students in the class did not participate, unless asked directly, and there was often a palpably tense atmosphere. As the course went on, students became if anything more muted, and apparently less inclined to participate, perhaps reflecting a growing frustration at their inability to engage with the material at an appropriate level.

A seminar on *Cloud Nine*

In order to support and illustrate my arguments, I present here an extract of data from one of the seminars in this module. This seminar took place in the middle of the module, at the end of the second term of the three-term year and was devoted to Caryl Churchill's provocative avant-garde play *Cloud Nine*, linked in the following week with the topic of feminist criticism.

Whilst the lecture preceding the seminar dealt with *Cloud Nine* from a performance perspective, the seminar itself focused on a theoretical question to do with textual readings rather than on an open discussion of the play. Thus, a number of foundational issues to do with the play – such as the readers' responses, the author's intentions and motivations, and the social and cultural context of the play's production and consumption – were left unattended to in the seminar, as were a number of performance-related questions that might have arisen from the lecture preceding. Given the likelihood that most students in the class would be unfamiliar with potentially shocking avant-garde drama of this sort, and with some of the complex issues raised by the play (especially in relation to sexuality and gender), I found it difficult to see how bypassing these issues altogether could be a sensible idea.

In fact, this lecturer, in the module as a whole, tended to avoid asking students to discuss their responses to texts freely, preferring to engage students in discussion of the theoretical concepts underlying the course, based on her own agenda of questioning. Whilst this decision might be defended on the grounds that this was, after all, primarily a literary theory course, it seemed to me that students might be able to access the theoretical concepts more easily if they were developed following a freer discussion of the text – in other words, from a starting point which was more clearly in line with students' existing knowledge and motivations.

This difficulty was aggravated by the lecturer's tendency to pitch questions at a relatively high level of conceptual abstraction. The level of challenge here was clearly considerably higher than most students could manage, and discussion was generally slow, quiet and fairly inhibited. Where discussion did take place, it was generally led by the same handful of five or six students each time; only three of those students consistently attempted to engage with the lecturers' questioning at the theoretical level which she had indicated, and, of those, only one was an uninhibited contributor to discussion. Little allowance seemed to be made for the probable difficulty these students might experience in dealing with abstract theoretical material, again given the relatively un-theorised nature of the A Level course, and its lack of emphasis on reading critical material.

In this seminar, following a brief introduction linking the session with the preceding lecture, the lecturer began consideration of the text, *Cloud Nine*, as follows, before giving students five minutes to discuss her question:

My opening question for this seminar, that I want you to think about, is what you do with a play, a literary text, like this which is so strongly issues-based? What do you do with it as a reader and what do you do with it as a critic? ... Do you just say – oh yeah, I know what she's doing? I mean what space does it leave you, what sort of essay would you write about it?

After a few minutes of group discussion, student feedback led to some general discussion about the play, which a number of students engaged in freely, clearly wishing to discuss some of the issues raised by the play, rather than address the theoretical question. The lecturer occasionally attempted to focus students on the theoretical question, though for a few minutes, the fairly lively discussion remained at a resolutely general level. When she eventually attempted to pin this down again, she was met with repeated silence.

So that brings me back to my question of what space does this text leave you to explore and examine it as a text, if that is what we do? How would you analyse it without merely telling me what Churchill's project was, what you think she intended?

Silence

Following this, she paused this discussion and introduced a fairly complex extract from an essay by Pierre Macherey introducing the idea that 'the work does not know itself' and asked whether this had implications for the way in which students might read it. She explained that this might mean, for instance, that one could approach the play from a post-colonial perspective that may not have been intended by the author:

Are you with this discussion at the moment? I wanted to raise it with this text because ... I've had essays which just paraphrase the text – that say this is actually what is going on in the text, rather than finding a way into it. ... Does that mean, however – I want to push you on a bit – that [post-colonialism] would be our only way of opening it up as a critic and talking about its absences or silences, or are there other things you could do with the play, if you feel that's what criticism does anyway? I mean, can you think of ways in which you would want to talk about this play?

One student mutters something inaudible

Do you think you would end up just working within the symbolism that Churchill's already given us, and you're kind of explicating it but only so far – so you're just saying I think Churchill's symbolism is this?

Silence

OK sorry I'm not putting this very well at all! Let me think of another way of saying it. I mean do you feel that what you're doing is just opening up to show the symbol system and how she's using it?

Silence

I think at this point in time I don't want to confuse you too much, but I just wanted to bring into the seminar the question of what we do when we analyse a text ... I wanted to ask you – what do you feel you do when you analyse, you know, a literary text?

Silence

OK now I've made you all incredibly quiet ...

The lecturer had rightly picked up on the fact that, at A Level, the students would have been trained in giving a certain type of critical account of a set text, focusing on straightforward analysis of the construction of a text with reference to authorial intention and straightforward social and historical context. She was trying to move students away from this position, but it seems likely that they did not have the conceptual framework on which to build, or with which to engage in the issue at the rather abstract level at which it was posed.

Students clearly found it very difficult to apply or manipulate the theoretical concepts they had covered in this way. It seems likely that the very difficult readings they had been set had not given them a firm hold on the concepts, and whilst the lectures may have given them a more solid hold on the basics of each theory, they were not confident enough in understanding them to engage in this kind of exploration. Further, it was not altogether clear why the lecturer had decided to adopt this particular approach at this particular time.

In this particular example, a series of problematic issues were raised which are likely to have made students uncomfortable. The lecturer asked students to reflect on 'what [they] might do with [the text] as a reader and what [they] might do with it as a critic'. The implications here that students might choose 'to do things with texts', and that these things might be different as a reader and as a critic, are problematic. What is the difference between a reader and a critic? What is a critic? What is the purpose of criticism? What does it mean to be a critic? How does being a critic relate to being a student of literature, and how does being a student relate to being a reader? What kind of things might one want to do with a text, and why? Ironically, the lecturer finally settled on a question – 'what do you feel you do when you analyse a literary text' – which might well have been very productive had it been used as the basis for the seminar – or indeed the whole module; but by the time she reached this form of words, it was too late. Arguably, this whole set of questions ought formally to have been dealt with right at the beginning of the course, if not at A Level.

The underlying assumption here is that the students will have a view about what a critic does or should do – (the lecturer suggests this explicitly when she says: 'if you feel that's what criticism does anyway') – and will be able to see a need to do different things with texts, including applying certain formalist, structuralist or Marxist principles which they have been introduced to. However, these are all issues that these students are unlikely to have encountered explicitly, or indeed to have an opinion about, beyond the idea that a critic should in some sense be able to understand a work and explain their understanding of it, as at A Level. Indeed, it is quite possible that, for many of the students, the business of analysis of texts is linked inextricably with the business of passing exams

rather than with a form of 'social critique'. The students may, in lectures and readings, have been introduced to certain theories, but it is questionable whether they have been provided with a broader framework, in terms of an understanding of the discipline they are engaged in, in order to make use of these theories, or to see why it should be necessary or desirable to do so.

Near the end of the seminar, the lecturer senses that she has pitched the discussion at an awkward level. She says that she 'let the play go into the background slightly' and briefly opens the floor to general comments about the play:

I think at this point in time I don't want to confuse you too much, but I just wanted to bring into the seminar the question of what we do when we analyse a text. In a way I let the play go into the background slightly, but it was that kind of question I wanted to ask you – what do you feel you do when you analyse, you know, a literary text?

Silence

OK now I've made you all incredibly quiet (*hesitant laughter*) so I need to just end on a slightly different note, I think, and I want to return to this question next week, because I want you to think about next week is – when you look at the feminist readings that you have for your reading, do they just corroborate what Churchill is doing in a literary way? I'll put that another way – are they carrying the same messages, are they just co-texts – to use the term that comes from cultural materialism – are they basically saying the same things, pointing at the problematic role that women may have in society, the problematic way that femininity itself is constructed, the cultural reading of femininity and womanhood, are they just co-texts or can you use the feminist readings for next week to open up this text in similar ways to the ways you might open up *Othello* or *The Waste Land*? So that's what I want you to think about for next week, but because I've made you all so incredibly silent now, I just want to ask you a very general question. Some of you said you found this play shocking. Did you enjoy it? Billy – did you say that you'd read it before?

Even in her attempt to create a link between this week's work and the following week's work, her discourse maintains the level of conceptual abstraction that has characterised it throughout the seminar. She returns once more to the theoretical question at the end:

OK. The Macherey approach is only one approach to criticism, but I think it's a powerful one to get you to think about what is it that you do in analysis, why do we ask you to analyse literary texts rather than just describe them? I mean why do we do this? Another good one could be a generic one – what is its genre? For instance, comedy – [a lecturer] does a great course in Part Two about comedy, creativity and critique, looking at how useful comedy has always been for social critique. Whether you find this a seamless comedy or not – I mean I don't find it generically easy to describe this as a comedy – but I'll leave that open. OK so if you could prepare those readings for next week.

Here she introduces the idea of genre, perhaps feeling that this parallel approach to criticism might be more familiar to students and thus illuminate Macherey's approach for them. She is probably right that students are more familiar with ideas about genre, although it is debatable, given the highly limited coverage of genre as a topic at A Level, until recently, that this will help them a great deal. But again, the question – a fundamental question and one which it would help students enormously to engage with in detail – is posed in a context that does not allow them to engage with it, laden as it is with assumptions about what students already know and understand, and coming at the end of the seminar rather than the beginning. Thus students' avenues into this issue have effectively been closed off.

In relation to the transition between A Level and university, the lecturer's approach throughout the seminar seems to demonstrate a lack of awareness of the level of conceptual and theoretical engagement which students are likely to have previously encountered, as well as a lack of awareness of the actual intellectual aptitude and motivation of the students, especially given that the average A Level grade of the students in the class is around B. In particular, it supposes that students have a level of understanding of the discipline at university level – its assumptions, purposes and frameworks – that A Level is highly unlikely to have provided. Nevertheless, even given these difficulties, it is clear that many of the ideas the lecturer was attempting to address in this seminar would in fact have been perfectly accessible to students if they had been introduced in a more structured way, using language and references that made links with students' existing knowledge and preoccupations.

It also seems clear, however, that A Level itself might well be able to make a contribution to this kind of learning by concerning itself more explicitly with the theoretical frameworks and social functions of criticism, as, until recently, there has been little sense at A Level of a purpose for

criticism beyond pleasing the examiners, or of literary study as anything other than certificated reading.

Emerging issues

Some of the most problematic aspects of this module seemed related not to the essential content of the module – the theories and texts to be studied – but to the manner of presentation of these, given the students' probable starting points. Despite the awareness of the nature of the gap between A Level and university English revealed by lecturers in my interviews with them, they seemed, throughout the module, to make considerable assumptions about the motivations of students in terms of their appreciation of literary texts and of literature as a cultural phenomenon, the value which they might ascribe to the activity of literary criticism, and their understanding of the nature and purpose of the discipline, its shape and its underlying frameworks. Consequently, there was often a sense of an inadequate infrastructure for the module.

These assumptions manifested themselves in the way in which lecturers frequently failed to establish what students actually knew, thought, or were able to do in relation to the topics in question – although the seminar tutor in the third term achieved more in this respect than the tutor in the second term. The design of the course reflected a strong agenda on the part of the lecturers; but this often seemed not to be shared by the students – not because they were unwilling to enter into it but perhaps, rather, because they did not know *how* to enter into it or *why* the agenda existed. This was often because they had not been given the opportunity to discuss it; at other times, it was because the agenda made unjustified assumptions about their pre-existing knowledge.

A number of recurring factors combined to lead to the students' difficulties, on which I found myself often commenting in lecture and seminar observation notes. First, I had frequent cause to reflect on the disjunction between A Level and university English. I sensed often that lecturers were making assumptions about students' knowledge about literature in general, as a cultural phenomenon, and about literary studies as a discipline, which A Level, with its lack of an explicit theoretical framework and its emphasis on the atomistic study of individual texts, does not necessarily equip students with. I found myself wondering to what extent it was sensible for the first year of a degree course in literature to prioritise an overview of *literary theory* over an overview of *literature* in this way, especially given the lack of such an overview in most A Level courses. In many cases, whilst it would have been desirable for lecturers to show more awareness of this, I felt strongly that the A Level Literature course taught at the time was at fault here, for failing to offer students a more comprehensive introductory entitlement to certain specified aspects of accessible knowledge about literature – for instance a

solid overview of the development of literary genres, a survey of literary history and periods, an underpinning exploration of the significance of form, structure and narrative, a basic understanding of literary processes of consumption and production, an introductory consideration of the nature and purpose of criticism, some reflection on issues of cultural value, and so on.³

Another manifestation of this issue was in relation to reading. The volume of reading that has to be undertaken by literature students is of course notorious; and it was clear that students were often poorly organised and lazy in their approach to this, and had not always done the reading as they should have. However, the main difficulty was not in the reading of the primary literary texts which were set, but in the reading of the secondary, critical texts. The anthology of literary theory, which constituted the core set text of the module, was simply too difficult for students to negotiate without considerable mediation, which was not forthcoming. I myself, clearly an experienced reader, found some of the set writings difficult and requiring considerable concentration. How, then, were these students to deal with them, especially given that the anthology provided little or nothing in the way of summary, guidance or context? Again, A Level English Literature has, until very recently, provided little in the way of precedent; indeed, many students have gone through an entire A Level Literature course without encountering literary criticism, never mind literary theory (Daw, 1997). Even were these B-grade students to have been introduced to literary criticism at A Level, however, this text would still have been too difficult.

Another widely recognised factor in the transition between A Level and university study, and one which was certainly problematic for students here, is the relatively small amount of teaching time, and the relatively impersonal nature of the contact between lecturers and students, even in seminars (Smith, 2002, 2004; Smith and Hopkins, 2005). Again, this is a notorious difficulty for both students and lecturers, and perhaps the most problematic aspect of it is the consequent difficulty for both in building a personal relationship and mutual understanding such as often develop between A Level teacher and student. Of course, it is a necessary part of intellectual coming-of-age to become a more independent learner, whose learning is not dependent on such a relationship, but the sudden disjunction here is considerable. Again, A Level needs to stand to account for not having defined more clearly ways in which, for instance, students of literature might learn transferable skills and knowledge in literary study that they might then apply more generally and independently to a range of texts and situations; this being the case, however, I often felt that lecturers failed to recognise a number of strategies that might have helped, at least partially, to overcome some of these problems. For instance, there was only a limited attempt on the part of lecturers to

'smooth over the joins' between events in the course – between modules, between weekly sessions, and between lectures and seminars. This was perhaps most noticeable when lecturers did not make links with previous lectures, and when the seminars which immediately followed the lectures each week did not make any reference to the specific content of the preceding lecture. There was also very little sense of connection between the work done in the first and second modules as both adopted altogether different styles and conceptual frameworks without any explicit links being made by the lecturers.

In particular, however, lecturers in the seminars I observed often did not take the opportunity to establish where students actually *were* in terms of their knowledge, understanding, engagement or response, which might have allowed them (the lecturers) to address the topic under consideration at a more appropriate level. Lecturers, presumably conscious of the very short time available each week to cover ground in the module, tended to plough on through their agenda, rather than taking time to establish exactly what students understood. Rarely, if ever, were students given free rein to say what they wanted to say or ask about a topic or text they had been asked to prepare, without the lecturer imposing an agenda on them – a restraint of a kind which often precluded discussion of the basic, underlying issues which students may have needed to discuss first. Often these seemed to be meta-cognitive questions such as 'what are we actually trying to achieve in this course?' 'why are these texts and/or issues significant?', 'what does it mean to be a critic?' At other times, when the lecturers' agenda was concerned with the application of theory to the set texts, the questions might concern basic literary responses which students had not yet had a chance to discuss, such as 'what do we feel is important in this text?' or 'what are the key issues relating to the cultural and social context of this text?'

My most frequently recurring thought during the observations was that what students needed, and had not been given, was an opportunity to engage concretely with fundamental questions about the purpose and nature of literary criticism, and the relationships between reading on the one hand, and criticism and theory on the other. Lecturers often appeared to make noble but somewhat misguided assumptions about students' cultural understanding and values. At A Level, there has been a tendency for teachers to encourage enjoyment and appreciation of set texts as expressive and aesthetic objects, rather than as objects of socio-cultural study (Griffith, 1987; Mitchell, 1994b; Peim, 1990; West, 1987) whilst recognising that many students will find such 'appreciation' difficult as the texts may not reflect their own cultural choices. Largely because of their relatively close relationship with their students, many A Level teachers are adept at inspiring those students who share their love of literature, whilst coaxing other less enthusiastic readers through the exams which they

know they need to pass for strategic reasons. In this way, A Level teachers have often neglected the possibility of adopting a more sociological approach to literary study which would not rely so heavily on an aesthetic valuing of the texts in question. Nevertheless, A level teachers tend to have much more insight into the range of motivations and values which students bring to literary study – largely, of course, because of the potential for extensive personal contact and discussion between teachers and students.

By contrast, the lecturers here often appeared surprised by the instrumental approach that many of their students adopt to their study, or by their reluctance to engage with texts on a less aesthetic plane. They adopted a less value-laden, more socio-culturally driven approach to literature (although interestingly there was no attempt to deal explicitly with questions to do with the canon and the definition of literature during the year), but often seemed unaware of the range of motivations that students might have in choosing to study literature, often assuming that students would automatically share their sense of the intellectual value of literary study, and their understanding of the definition of the discipline.

Working towards better transitions

In the discussion above, I have suggested that the students in my study experienced a number of problems in transition from A Level to University English in relation to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the course. At A Level, they had been given little opportunity to move beyond a conventional form of textual ‘appreciation’ towards a broader and more conceptual grasp of the nature of literature and literary study and response – a situation confirmed both by students’ responses in lectures and seminars and by their comments in my interviews with them. In the first year university course, however, their familiarity with such concepts and frameworks was assumed to such an extent that they were effectively still hindered from a genuine engagement with them.

The opportunity for students to learn effectively about the nature of the discipline, and to become truly engaged in some of the fundamental theoretical and conceptual issues in literary studies, appeared for many of them to have simply slipped away into the ‘gap’ between A Level and HE, I watched as the class became increasingly silent, and as many of the students gradually lost interest and/or adopted minimalist and instrumental approaches to assessment aimed at ‘getting through’. In the light of these findings, it is interesting to reflect on Goodwyn’s work with PGCE English students (2002), in which he suggests that, for many English students, it is as though the exposure to the theoretical aspects of literary studies at university has never happened: rather, they tend to retain and revert to a traditional A Level approach to literature, fuelled by

their memories of enjoyable A Level discussions about theme, character and plot in the company of a teacher and a group of students with whom they had a close bond. Goodwyn's reflections also remind us that the relationship between school and university English is important not only because of the transition process for students between A Level and HE but also as a crucial element in the cycle of English: A Level student becomes undergraduate student becomes English teacher.

Generalisation from a study of just one class in one university must be made cautiously. My observations apply, to varying extents, to the experience of *all* the students in the seminar group; however it should be noted that two or three of the students in the class demonstrated greater interest, understanding and/or stamina than the others. It is likely also that other classes in the same university and in other universities will have had very different experiences. Nevertheless, the experience of this class clearly raises a number of issues which are of general value in considering the transition between A Level and university English, and which resonate with the few smaller-scale studies that have been carried out. A survey of the experience of seminars in a number of different subjects, by Wisker et al. (2001), for instance, found an English class similarly characterised by tense silences. Green's recent survey of students' and teachers' experiences of transition at this level in English (Green, 2005a, 2005b, 2007) identified HE lecturers' limited pedagogical expertise as a significant issue, as well as the disjunction between the A Level and HE curriculum. A study of a first year English seminar by Jones et al. (2005) gives an account of a small seminar group in which the lecturer takes a very different approach, allowing students to initiate discussion according to their own agendas; however, despite his attempts to model a more critical discourse through his questioning, he then finds difficulty in moving the discussion away from a generalist discourse of plot, theme, character.

The transition between school and university is notoriously beset by generic difficulties, whatever the subject – for instance, the adjustments to taking notes in lectures, to managing time effectively and to covering the quantity of reading required. However, there are clearly also important subject-specific elements in this transition: in the case of English, these chiefly concern the transition between two quite different paradigms for literary study. I remain convinced that the paradigm which underlies English in HE – one which adopts a stronger socio-cultural emphasis than the traditional A Level paradigm – is one which potentially offers many students a more rewarding, accessible and engaging experience, and one that should also underpin the subject at A Level. New A Level courses introduced this year seem to have gone some way towards achieving this; nevertheless, it seems clear that there are likely to be many issues in both curriculum and pedagogy, at both Sixth Form and university level, which

need to be explored further if we are to find effective ways of engaging students in such a project. To this end, it might be valuable to take steps to end the long tradition of lack of communication between sixth form and university teachers.

Notes

1. Mitchell's valuable study of a student's writing at both A Level and university English (Mitchell, 1993, 1994a, 1994b) is the only previous case study of the experience of transition. In addition, Barnes and Barnes (1984) and Ballinger (2002) both give accounts of observations of an A Level lesson. Recently, Jones et al. (2005) have written about a larger scale project, currently in progress, involving observations of a number of university English seminars.
2. In addition to these core modules, students chose other modules that might be directly or indirectly related to English (e.g. a drama in a practice module, or an introduction to texts of the European Renaissance or to European Modernism).
3. It should be noted that new A Level courses from 2008 do now incorporate some of these aspects in a more explicit way.

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