

From School to University and Back Again

Travels between Sixth Form and HE English

Gary Snapper reflects on classroom experiences and recent debates which led him to explore the relationship between school and university English, and on what he found when he followed a group of A Level Literature students to university.

From school to university and back again

Most of us only have the experience of following an undergraduate course in English once, but I've recently been doing it all over again.

The first time, of course, was when I went to university as an undergraduate – at the age of 20 – to read English. From there, I went on to become an English teacher, eventually becoming a Head of English in a large comprehensive. By the time I was 36, I was (as everyone is) exhausted, but also thirsty for some time to read, think and reflect, not only to develop my subject knowledge but also to cast light on what I thought I had been doing in the classroom for the last ten years or so.

At about that time, I was fortunate to have the opportunity for a period of study leave for one term, (through the 'Schoolteacher Fellow Commonership' scheme at Cambridge University.) The experience of being a don for a term was in itself fascinating; but the main bonus was the luxury of being able to do little other than read and think for three months – and, frankly, have a bit of a rest too. I returned to school hugely refreshed, but also even thirstier for knowledge; the work I had done had opened up many new sets of questions, and the exposure to research and ideas about English teaching had made me consider the possibility of doing more extended academic work. I put together a research proposal, and, two years later, began a part-time PhD at the Institute of Education in London.

My research interest – the philosophy and practice of the teaching of literature, especially post-16 – led me to focus on the transition between school and university English. Hence, for my doctoral study, I found myself going back to university English, following a class of undergraduates through the first year of their English degree, sitting in each week on their lectures and seminars, and experiencing an undergraduate English course for the second time, twenty years on – only this time from the perspective of a school English teacher. In this article, I try to explain some of the thinking behind the project, and to outline some of my findings.

Starting out: discovering A Level teaching

When I began teaching A Level Literature at the very start of my teaching career in 1989, I found (as many others have done) that, unlike GCSE teaching (for instance), A Level teaching was something done behind closed doors with little guidance about or discussion of how most effectively to do it or what issues it might raise. There was only Literature (no Language.) One had one's set texts and one taught them, guiding one's students in a Leavisite sort of way towards the appreciation of the

texts' literary qualities which would be required both to enrich them as readers and to satisfy the examiners that they did indeed appreciate the texts. This was all well and good, and my students were, by and large, affable, generally went along with this project and seemed, mainly, to enjoy it.

But I had many questions. What was the exact nature of the specialist knowledge that one was required to communicate to literature students, beyond that of the general reader? Was that knowledge simply a broad knowledge of many individual texts, periods and authors, or did it add up to something more generalisable – a framework of knowledge and skills for the study of literature, perhaps? What exactly did I know from my own university education about these frameworks: the nature of genre, narrative, form, metaphor and literary language (for instance), or Shakespeare's theatre or Modernism? And how might I best formulate that knowledge authoritatively for teaching?

Beyond that, too, a set of questions about culture and values, and the ways in which syllabuses and exam papers enshrined certain attitudes and perspectives. I hadn't studied literary theory at university, but my interactions with school students pointed to a whole set of issues to do with literary and cultural value, and social power, which lay in the background of literature teaching, largely unvoiced.

The construct 'Literature' lay at the heart of the A Level syllabus, unexamined. My students had to accept that the texts they were studying were 'Literature' and had to 'appreciate' them to pass their exams. But *did* they appreciate them, or was there some sort of act of cultural obedience or mimicry going on? What did they *really* think? How did they connect this world of school literature with their own varied styles of cultural consumption? And what was the function of their acquiring the skills of 'appreciation'? (I later discovered that Alan Sinfield had addressed all these questions in his influential essay 'Shakespeare and Education' (1985), and that similar issues of cultural value were central to debates within media studies in the UK, for instance in Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994)).

My students were happy, by and large, to read, discuss and study 'great' literary works; I was happy to teach those texts. Some students lapped it all up; others went through the motions; most found it enjoyable and interesting enough. But it seemed to me right from the start that there was something missing from literary study at this level; as Robert Eaglestone was later to write (2000), the focus of A Level study was almost entirely on 'intrinsic' questions to do with 'the words on the page' of the set text, with little if any consideration of 'extrinsic' questions to do with the nature of literature and its operation in society. It seemed to me that simply to ignore questions of culture, value and perspective, or of the functions and methods of literary study, was not adequate; such questions were important, perhaps even centrally so. It was also clear to me that students were and would be interested in such questions, and that consideration of such questions might help them to be clearer about what they were doing and why they were doing it.

I.B. English: mixing politics with literature

Moving to a new school, I began teaching the International Baccalaureate as well as A Level. I discovered that the I.B. English Literature syllabus (known as 'English A1')

within the I.B. Diploma) was formulated very differently from A Level syllabuses; and this started me thinking more concretely about the ways in which the subject might be framed and constructed in different ways at this level in order to achieve different ends. The following features of I.B. English were of particular interest:

- (i) More texts were studied (8 or 9 at A Level, 15 in the I.B.), though, crucially, not all at the level of detailed, comprehensive study – so breadth of reading was built into the course.
- (ii) Following on from that, not everything on the syllabus had to be assessed. There was freedom to explore and experiment in parts of the course that were not subject to ‘high-stakes’ assessment. The emphasis was on the eventual application of knowledge gained from broad learning – what became known at A Level as ‘synoptic’ learning.
- (iii) Texts were studied mainly in groups in relation to genre, period, culture or theme, with an emphasis on understanding the texts as representative of the genre, period, etc.
- (iv) Because of the internationalist philosophy of the I.B., there was a considerable emphasis on ‘world literature’, as well as English literature, and an encouragement to study texts from a range of cultures within the English-speaking world. There was also an emphasis on exploring cultural, social and political ideas significant to an international outlook, such as colonialism, gender and class.
- (v) There was considerable scope for teacher and student freedom in choice of texts in parts of the course.
- (vi) Unseen criticism – of both poetry and prose texts – was a compulsory element of the exam and encouraged the teaching of literary frameworks and the development of independent learning skills.
- (vii) Oral assessment constituted a significant part of the course, and privileged the idea of discussion and oral presentation.
- (viii) Parts of the course allowed creative or re-creative responses.

Thus, I found I.B English to be a more socially, culturally, politically engaged course; one which encouraged a wide range of creative and critical responses and modes of study and thought; and one which had a clearer sense of what students might learn about *literature* as well as about individual set texts.

The part of the syllabus that particularly excited me was the part called ‘School’s Own Choice’, where the teacher was free to choose a group of texts entirely unconstrained by any list of set texts; the only requirement was that the texts should have literary merit and that they should be connected by theme, genre or period. The study of these texts would be assessed internally through an oral presentation which could be a talk or a performance based on any of the chosen texts. This provided an opportunity to experiment with texts or ideas which it might otherwise be difficult to find space for in a conventional literary syllabus, and in particular to explore some of the ideas about literary value which I had been thinking about.

In the ‘World Literature’ element of the course, we had chosen to focus on some quite politically charged texts from Africa, including a play by the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiongo which had been banned by the neo-colonial government of Kenya, led by Daniel Arap Moi – and, for the writing of which, Ngugi had been imprisoned.

In studying this play, I had introduced the class to extracts from Ngugi's post-colonial writings in which he spoke of English – literature and language – as 'a cultural bomb' which could be used to annihilate native cultures and political resistance. As part of the 'School's Own Choice' element, I decided to expand this exploration of literature, politics and power into a study of a self-constructed anthology of poems, short pieces and extracts from contemporary Scottish literature, focusing particularly on the writings of James Kelman, Irvine Welsh, Tom Leonard, Edwin Morgan, Alasdair Gray and Liz Lochhead. I also introduced into the class a series of newspaper articles about contemporary Scottish literature, and a video of a BBC2 'Late Show' item on Kelman, which tackled a variety of issues such as the relationships between class, dialect and English literature, and, more broadly, between power, language and culture; the nature of literary language; and the nature of the literary establishment and discourses about literary value.

For me, and for many of my students, this work seemed to lend an exciting 'edge' to literary study, a sense of exploring a boundary which had not always been there before. In bringing such a strong focus on the 'extrinsic' into the classroom – questions about the way literature interacts with politics, culture, language and society – it seemed to me that we had created a context, a framework, for the more conventional study at the heart of the syllabus, a space for experimentation, and a broadening and deepening of the students' understanding.

It was the very different construction of syllabus in the IB which had enabled this to happen – with its emphasis on cultural connections and literary frameworks, its broad approach to learning, and its more varied approach to textual study and assessment. But I was also struck by how the explicit engagement with political issues had struck a chord for many of the students, allowing them a glimpse of the ways in which literature operates in the real world outside the classroom and the examination hall. (See *Snapper (2008)* for a fuller account of this work).

Similarly, my first experiences of teaching English Language A Level and Film Studies A Level (both subjects I had to do crash courses in before teaching!) demonstrated to me how different approaches to understanding textuality and language, and different ways of constructing curriculum, might be valuable in animating literary study – for instance, a focus on concepts of genre, narrative and representation in film studies, and a focus on language change and language variety in English language.

Curriculum 2000: connecting with the university

When the opportunity for study leave arose, my initial intention was to develop my classroom work on Scottish literature further, learning more about the cultural, linguistic and political contexts of the work, and formulating new ways of approaching the ideas with sixth form students. However, I was soon sidetracked into reading about broader ideas to do with the history and philosophy of the discipline, and in particular debates about the nature of advanced literature teaching

The crunch time for the debate about A Level English was the 1970s. The first major challenge to the status quo came with the work of John Dixon and the Schools Council in the 1970s (Dixon, 1979), work which ultimately led not only to a modest modernisation of the A Level English Literature course, including the development of

coursework and a more pupil-centred ethos (Brown and Gifford, 1989), but to the beginning of A Level English Language in the 1980s. The 80s also saw a period of experimentation with different models of literature syllabus through the 'alternative syllabus' project, which – though most schools continued with the standard exam board syllabuses – enabled certain schools to construct their own more or less adventurous or experimental syllabuses, to be endorsed by the exam boards.

By the late 80s, as the message of literary theory began to filter through to the general populace through progressive university English faculties (Eagleton, 1983), a fully fledged fight about the nature of A Level English Literature broke out in the journals (*The English Magazine* for the English and Media Centre, *English in Education* for NATE and *The Use of English* for the English Association). Radical voices (Peim, 1991), inspired particularly by Marxist academic critics such as Terry Eagleton and Alan Sinfield, argued for a radical overhaul of the subject at A Level Literature along the lines of cultural studies, seeking to challenge canonical conceptions of literature and break down barriers between the study of popular and canonical texts, or to place language study at the heart of the subject. Liberal voices, many in NATE, sought to defend a progressive but less politicised model of student-centred, personal-response focused literary study. Finally, more conservative voices in the universities and the English Association argued for a return to a strictly canonical course. Patrick Scott gives a wry account of this whole imbroglio in his book *Reconstructing A Level English* (1989), whilst Peel (1993) reports on a series of conferences held at the time between NATE and university English faculties in an attempt to find common ground. (See Snapper (2007) for a fuller account of these debates.)

1989, the year of the introduction of the National Curriculum, saw the beginning of the end of this ideological mayhem. Threatened by state interference in the 11-16 curriculum, symbolised by Thatcher's suspension of the LINC (Language in the National Curriculum) project in 1991, attention shifted away from A Level to the core curriculum. At A Level, the government cracked down on alternative syllabuses and imposed a set of strict regulations on the construction of A Level Literature syllabuses. Thus the powerful debate about the nature of literature and literary study in schools which had characterised the 80s was effectively silenced during the 90s.

It wasn't until the advent of New Labour and the Curriculum 2000 initiative that a forum began to open up again for possible change. By this stage, the 'theory wars' were well and truly over in the university English faculties, and the messages of literary theory more or less assimilated into English degree courses. Curriculum 2000 sought to draw universities formally into the development of new A Levels, against a backdrop of widening participation, and initiated a new debate about the future direction of English A Level. The 'keynote' of this debate was Robert Eaglestone's *Doing English* (2000), a heartfelt plea from a prominent university lecturer for A Level English to step into line with the direction of movement of university English.

Eaglestone's wasn't the only voice from the universities to be heard at this time. Chris Hopkins' *Thinking about Texts* (Hopkins, 2001) also sought to explore the nature of undergraduate learning in first year English; and the newly founded HE English Subject Centre promoted many examples of innovative curriculum design and

pedagogy in universities which sought to ease the school-to-university transition and to meet students at a mid-point between A Level and university English.

In practice: researching the post-16 classroom

As I discovered the debates about post-16 English that had taken place in the 70s and 80s, and as I witnessed a new flowering of them in relation to Curriculum 2000, I began to consider what kind of research might bring a useful new perspective. There had been a lot of *debate* – but there was very little evidence about what *actually* happens between teachers and students in an advanced literature classroom. I wanted to find out more about the attitudes and approaches of teachers and students engaged in teaching and studying post-16 literature, and about how the issues raised by curriculum debate are played out in the classroom.

Having established that university English had in many respects ‘moved on’ to a more modern conception of the subject in ways that A Level English Literature had not, I also wanted to find out what happens to A Level students when, on arriving at university to read English, they are confronted with a very different formulation of the subject; and I wanted to see whether university English might offer A Level English ways forward for the future. Thus, as already described, I settled on a research project focused on following a group of undergraduates during the first year of their university course.

The transition between school and university is notoriously difficult for a number of reasons, in particular the move to a far greater emphasis on independent learning; these generic issues are well documented. I wanted, though, to understand the ways in which particular aspects of English as a discipline might contribute to the process of transition, and to observe how both teachers and students negotiate the oft-noted ‘gap’ between A Level and university English. I was also curious to see how adequate A Level turned out to be as a preparation for what was to come.

Over the course of the year, I followed one class of 25 undergraduates at one well-regarded ‘new’ university, where the average A Level English grade of the students was ‘B’. I attended and observed all of the class’s weekly core lectures and seminars, with my main focus on the central literary theory module which occupied the second and third terms of the year. I also interviewed the class’s lecturers and a focus group of seven students, at regular intervals.

The whole experience was fascinating. My perspective as an A Level English teacher, as well as my discussions with the students, allowed me in some senses to experience the course through the eyes of the students; at the same time, my perspective as an English specialist and academic researcher allowed me to experience it through the eyes of the lecturers. The gap between the knowledge, experiences and expectations of the students and of the lecturers at times appeared at times like an unbridgeable chasm, and it was powerful to witness the struggles of both sides to come to terms with the experience.

Students encountered a number of problems. The sheer quantity of reading required in a short time was a problem for many, but the largely unsupported reading of certain types of texts caused particular problems. Complex Modernist and highly

political avant-garde texts (such as Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*) were of a type generally beyond the previous experience of most of the students, and they found it difficult to place such texts in secure contexts. Students were also ambivalent about and lacked confidence in the independent reading of older texts, such as Shakespeare, and poetry generally. Most of all, the reading of complex secondary texts – criticism and theory – proved highly problematic (see page 34 of this edition of EDM for further discussion). Students often appeared uncertain about why the study they were engaged in was so very different from what they had experienced before, and how they should deal with the situation.

In the limited teaching time available, student voice was rarely heard or enlisted as a starting point for moving on, and thus the course seemed to steam ahead regardless of where students actually were in their knowledge and learning; in addition, lecturers' pedagogical repertoires were often very limited. At the same time, it was clear that A Level could have done a lot more to prepare these students for what they were experiencing, and to introduce them to some of the methods, discourses and frameworks that underpinned the course.

My research seemed to demonstrate clearly some of the tensions at work in making the transition from school to university English. In addition to the already well-documented generic learning difficulties encountered by first year undergraduates, I noted that the ex-A Level students in my study were in many respects unprepared by A Level for the radical shift in curriculum philosophy and critical perspective (and associated reading and writing demands) that took place within the discipline at this point, and that their lecturers had some difficulty in managing this shift pedagogically, even though they were aware in an abstract sense of the existence of the difficulty and the reasons for it. I also noted the existence of a stratum of 'knowledge about literature' that appeared to 'fall through' the gap between school and university study – knowledge that, between the foundational study of A Level and the advanced study of the first year university course, students had difficulty in assimilating. This led, for many students, to a considerable disengagement from elements of the university course, a retreat to often reductive approaches to 'getting through' it, and a fond nostalgia for A Level ways of doing things. (See Snapper (2009) for a fuller discussion of these findings.)

It seemed clear to me that A Level teachers – and the A Level course – could learn a great deal, in terms of subject knowledge and curriculum philosophy, from the broad approach to critical perspectives and cultural analysis which underpinned the university course; it also seemed clear that university lecturers could learn a great deal from A Level teachers about how to translate curriculum into practice through effective pedagogy and awareness of learning processes and motivations. If the two 'sides' were to engage with each other, the potential for development could be considerable, perhaps leading to a greater unity of purpose at a crucial moment in the 'cycle' of English, and more effective learning at both levels – the products of an A Level course which more fully embraced and worked with elements of the contemporary discipline, and a university course which more fully embraced and worked with the literary experience and motivations of its students.

Time for a change: arguing for new approaches

My investigations into the nature of A Level and university English teaching, and the relationship between the two, convinced me that A Level English Literature needed to change to respond to recent developments in the discipline, and that Sixth Form and university teachers of English needed to talk to each other and understand each other more. Thus, I sought to try to make practical use of the work I had been doing, and to become involved in debates about the future direction of the subject.

As a starting point, in 2003, I attended a conference of the newly established English Subject Centre, one of a number of HE subject centres set up by the Higher Education Academy to focus attention on pedagogy and curriculum in higher education. The conference, *The Condition of the Subject*, took a broad look at the current state of English; one of its strands focused on developments at A Level, seeking to open up once more a discussion between schools / colleges and universities about the direction of the subject.

As a result of the discussion which took place, Barbara Bleiman, of the English and Media Centre, and I set up a small cross-phase discussion group (eventually dubbed the 'English Reform Group 14-19') composed of like-minded university lecturers, secondary English teachers and A Level examiners to try to explore issues about A Level English Literature, and to make representations to QCA and the Tomlinson 14-19 Reform committee. The group met on and off for a couple of years, and the meetings were a fascinating experience, as we attempted to find a way to share accounts of our different views and experiences of teaching English, and to feel our way to a cross-phase consensus on where we thought A Level English Literature might go from here.

Much of the group's work focused on trying to formulate a curriculum model for A Level Literature, since the group agreed that, unlike most other subjects, English Literature at this level did not actually have a core set of concepts, ideas or methods at its heart; instead the curriculum effectively consisted only of a list of set texts, different for each exam board.

The experience of exploring new ways of thinking about the curriculum and establishing common ground between university and school English was, I think for all of us, fascinating, and showed how productive and interesting discussions between the two phases can be. Further, some of the group's ideas did eventually inform the development of some of the new specifications that began in September 2008; a similar approach to that adopted by the group can be seen in the new AQA B Literature specification, with its focus on genre, narrative, representation and critical perspective.

At the same time, another group of which I had become a member, the NATE Post-16 Committee, was also beginning to thrash out ideas about the future of A Level English in the light of potential 14-19 reform. This group, however, took a rather different approach. From the start it became clear that the group – comprising teachers of all three English A Levels – Lit, Lang and Lang/Lit – was interested in exploring the constitution of the post-16 subject more broadly, examining not only the formulation of the three separate subjects that make up English A Level, but also challenging the notion of having three separate subjects rather than one unified English.

The idea of one unified English A Level is clearly a long way from becoming a reality, even if it is thought desirable. But the reasons for *entertaining* the notion, at least, are compelling. The A Level and university English students of today will become the English teachers of tomorrow, and the school subject English – embracing literature, language, and media, as well as literacy and creative writing – increasingly demands specialised knowledge in all those areas from teachers of the subject, all the way up to A Level. Further, the English curriculum until the age of 16 is strongly founded on the inter-relationship between those elements. Although there is some fragmentation at GCSE, the strict partition between discourses relating to the different elements only really kicks in at A Level.

Whether or not the subject unifies or continues to offer three separate pathways, it's possible, perhaps, to envisage a scenario whereby students at A Level and at university could specialise to a greater or lesser extent in one of those elements, yet also retain a hold on the fundamentals of each one and on the ways in which each can inform the others. For instance, the discourses of English language, media/cultural studies and creative writing all offer crucial perspectives on and valuable approaches to the study of literature. And, as we argued in our report *Text : Message* (NATE Post-16 Committee, 2005), the idea of discourse is in many respects at the heart of study in the arts, humanities and social sciences in today's universities.

In addition to the work of these two groups, there has been a recent proliferation of writing and research about transitions and relationships between Sixth Form and university English in the UK. From a secondary English perspective, work by Carol Atherton (2005) on the formation of the university discipline and its relationship with the school subject, and by Andrew Green (2005) and John Hodgson (2010) on the transition between school and university, all featured in this *EDM*, has expanded our knowledge in this area, whilst the journals *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* and *Pedagogy* have, over the last few years, featured series of articles about pedagogy, transition and the construction of the discipline in English.

Moving on: possibilities for the future

Where does all this research take us, and why is it important? One objection to a focus on the transition to university English is that only a very small proportion of Sixth Form English students go on to read English at university; but this has always seemed a weak objection to me. First, the vast majority of A Level students now go on to university, and, whatever subject they study, breadth of knowledge and independent learning skills, and the ability to cope with the demands of disciplinary frameworks and critical reading will be crucial. Second, some of those few students who do go on to read English, as I have argued above, will go on to be the English teachers of tomorrow, and so the experience of the subject they undergo is of great significance for the health of the school-university 'cycle' of the subject.

Beyond that, issues arising from the Sixth Form-HE relationship raise a number of significant questions about how we conceptualise the activity of reading in the curriculum, about what we believe the purpose of literary study is, and about the ways in which curriculum and pedagogy coincide and co-exist in order to bring the

subject alive for students in ways which capture their imaginations and engage their critical and creative faculties.

One of the main concerns of the lecturers in my study about the students who came to them from A Level was that they were unprepared for the idea of literary study as cultural analysis rather than as 'appreciation'. Of course it's a tall order for A Level teachers to turn 16 year-old readers into fully-fledged cultural analysts in two years, and there's no doubt that university lecturers need to be more realistic about what is possible here, and take greater responsibility for effecting this transformation. In my study, many students were quickly alienated by this approach; but a more sympathetic approach to *pedagogy* on the lecturers' part could, it seemed to me, have achieved a great deal more.

Nevertheless, it's true, in my view, that at A Level (and maybe even below) we are often spectacularly unclear about the functions of formal literary study and the type of reading we are seeking to promote. Ideas about 'loving' and 'appreciating' 'literature' can get in the way of an understanding of the complex ways in which students and teachers engage with reading at this level, and we might be wiser to make a clearer division between encouraging a love of reading, on the one hand, and engaging in acts of literary criticism and analysis, on the other. (I'm not, of course, suggesting that they are entirely separate things; they are inter-related in complex ways, as any discussion about this with a group of A Level students will demonstrate). Kathleen McCormick's excellent book *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English* (1994) provides an accessible and thought-provoking introduction to this debate.

We also need to think carefully about how we construct learning through curriculum structures. At university level, students are likely to find a curriculum that is almost entirely uninterested in discussing the fine details of individual literary texts, but is rather concerned with broad social, cultural, literary, linguistic and political ideas and how literature represents them. Again, we cannot abdicate our responsibility for teaching students to read individual texts carefully, and the set text will rightly remain central to what we do. But we do need to consider further how we place those texts in learning contexts which encourage students to move clearly from the 'intrinsic' to the 'extrinsic' – not only because that is what is required by university study, but also because it is, in itself, a good thing which might create more engaged students who are able to connect their study to the 'big questions', as Eagleton puts it.

The 2008 A Level specifications have made good headway here; but we also need to be less parochial in outlook. As I have suggested, the I.B, Media Studies and Film Studies provide interesting models; but fascinating work has also been done in this area in the United States and in Australia. In the U.S., for instance, the influential critic Robert Scholes (1998, 1985) has written not only about his philosophy of teaching the subject in a post-theory, multi-cultural society, but also about work he has done with local schools to construct new curricula for teaching advanced students about culture and language in far broader terms than a conventional literature syllabus. The equally influential Gerald Graff (Graff, 1992) has written, also from the perspective of a U.S. university English professor, about what it means to teach English in the light of the 'culture wars'. In Australia, university Education

faculties led a period of radical reform of advanced literature syllabuses which, whilst maintaining a close focus on literature, set out to frame textual study in more modern ways (Beavis, 2001).

Ideas about cultural value and perspective are in many respects at the heart of modern university English, but in my study I found a danger that, far from drawing students into the project of cultural analysis through literature, literary theory and other critical perspectives might alienate students – a phenomenon also noted by Goodywn (2002) in his study of PGCE English students. My observations suggested strongly that the complex language and conceptual difficulty of such approaches was the cause of this alienation, especially when placed at the very beginning of the degree course. The inappropriate pitching of this material, with little mediation in classes, demonstrated another crucial aspect of advanced literary study: the importance of student voice, and of understanding where students are coming from, and what their values and motivations are.

Unless pedagogy and curriculum start from where students *are* – what Vygotsky conceptualises as ‘zones of proximal development’ – they are unlikely to succeed. And unless students are asked to *talk* about where they are, we will not easily find out. Here, it’s not just about understanding what students know and can do, it’s also about understanding what they value, feel and think, and how their natural curiosity can be engaged. As A Level teachers we certainly have easier access to this understanding than do university lecturers; this is another strong argument for the two sides to talk to each other, but also a reminder that as A Level teachers we can use this knowledge to frame our teaching, as far as the syllabus will allow us.

Finally, a cultural analysis approach to literature demands an understanding of how literature and criticism operate in society. My research suggested that, at A Level, texts (both literary and critical) often become – for obvious reasons – classroom-bound and in some sense inert objects of study, and that students have some difficulty conceptualising their contexts of production and reception in meaningful ways. At university, lecturers often seem to assume that students know, for instance what criticism and theory are and what they are for, or the social mechanics of being a poet or a poetry lover or theatre-goer – when in fact many don’t. There’s a limit to how much a course of formal study can bridge this divide; but approaches such as creative and re-creative writing within literature classes have the potential to transform students’ experiences here, as Pope (1995) and Knights and Thurgar-Dawson (2006) have argued.

To move on, we need to understand more clearly the network of values, attitudes and perspectives which students, teachers and lecturers bring to the study of literature, the ways in which these approaches have been formed by past and present discourses about the discipline *and* about literature, and the ways in which the literature curriculum comes to life in the classroom. Understanding what happens when English stops being a school subject and starts being a university subject provides an excellent starting point, and one that offers great opportunities for the development of subject knowledge in the broadest sense, but to achieve this we need to find out more about what actually happens in Sixth Form classrooms and undergraduate seminars, and we need to get teachers and lecturers talking to each other.

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