BEYOND THE WORDS ON THE PAGE

A study of the relationship between
A Level English Literature
and university English

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PhD Thesis

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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Headmaster: If I speak of Hector, it is of enthusiasm shared, passion conveyed and seeds sown of future harvest. He loved language. He loved words. For each and every one of you, his pupils, he opened a deposit account in the bank of literature and made you all shareholders in the wonderful world of words.

Alan Bennett, *The History Boys*

***

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the tensions between the different paradigms of literary study dominant at A Level English Literature and in university English. The central focus of the project is a multi-layered case study of a first year undergraduate course in English Studies, in which I examine the attitudes and behaviours of one class and its teachers in relation to their teaching and learning over the course of a year – focusing in particular on approaches to reading – using data collected from interviews with both teachers and students, and observations of lectures and seminars.

The project takes as its starting point the problematic relationship between A Level English Literature and English in higher education, and focuses on issues arising from students' transition from A Level English Literature to university English. In particular it attempts to evaluate the extent to which students have been prepared by their experiences at A Level to assimilate approaches to literature teaching based in literary theory, and the extent to which such approaches might offer an appropriate model for the future development of A Level English Literature and arrangements for transition between secondary and tertiary English.

My analysis of the data suggests that the significant discrepancies between the way the subject is formulated at A Level and at university, and the consequent tensions between students' and lecturers' expectations of and assumptions about the course, can lead to significant problems in terms of access and motivation when students transfer to the university, and pose particular pedagogical challenges for lecturers. I argue that it is vital that approaches to curriculum and pedagogy at both levels take into account the implications of this transition in relation to the development of students' subject knowledge, disciplinary awareness, and cultural values.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE TO UNIVERSITY ENGLISH: VALUES AND TENSIONS IN LITERARY STUDY

In this chapter, I outline the origins and scope of the research project presented in this thesis. I begin with a brief account of the project and its impetus, before going on to examine the historical and autobiographical contexts of the issues I investigate. I conclude with an outline account of the thesis, as presented in more detail in the following chapters.

1. Students, teachers, literary texts: engaging with literature at A Level and beyond

In his well-known essay on Shakespeare and education, Alan Sinfield (1985) comments on the cultural and ideological tensions that exist in literary study in schools as a result of the way literature is made to work in the institutional context. The appreciation of literature, he argues, implies a set of universal cultural values which students need to profess in order to attain within the educational system. 'Literature becomes a mark of differential attainment', he writes, 'preparing pupils for the differential opportunities and rewards in society at large' (p.158). It follows, he continues, that 'the allegedly universal culture to which equal access is apparently offered is, at the same time, a marker of 'attainment' and hence of privilege,' discriminating against many students 'on the grounds of class, gender and ethnic origins' (p.160). Students are generally compliant in this project, having been 'persuaded to accept appropriate attitudes to literature as a criterion of general capacity'; however, he points out that that is not the end of the story:

> Of course it should not be assumed that the process of ideological reproduction in schools is invariably successful. A survey of 1000 pupils taking O and A Level English Literature in selective schools in 1968 found that although most of them expressed a commitment to Literature, their actual private reading was 'light' (p.161).

Sinfield goes on to quote the authors of that report (Yarlott & Harpin, 1970):

> It is as though many of these pupils have two sets of cultural values – one for school and the outside investigator, another for home and their leisure reading (p.6).

It is now twenty years since Sinfield was writing, and the issues he raises are still pressing in the U.K. Whilst there may have been some alleviation of the situation he describes in terms of the construction of examinations and dominant modes of pedagogy in literature education, these are nevertheless inconsistent. Changes in approach have often been superficial or isolated, and battle still rages, for instance, over the way Shakespeare is positioned at Key Stage 3 of the National Curriculum. Advanced literature classes at school and university are still highly unsatisfactory in terms of their gender balance, a phenomenon commented on by Sinfield in 1985. A serious engagement with the role of context and interpretation in literary study at school level – again, a major aspect of Sinfield's critique – has only just been entered into, in the context of Curriculum 2000 and the 2008 A Level revisions, and with only limited effect. Meanwhile, English as a broader subject has changed enormously around the traditional hub of Literature, as English Language and Media Studies, for instance, have provided alternative routes by which students might explore and engage in a critique of culture and society, and alternative models for the study of culture and language.

I came to Sinfield as a result of a desire to understand more precisely the cultural processes he describes, having observed them at work in my own classroom, and in those around me, in the 1990s. The clash of cultural values in the literature classroom, and a resulting sense of confused purpose and problematic pedagogy, seemed to me often to be acute, though frequently submerged or concealed to a great degree by the rituals of the examination system. I was particularly interested in the way in which these tensions manifest themselves in post-16 education. At the point where students no longer study literature compulsorily, one might expect some alleviation or clarification of these issues - yet this was not my experience.

The research project which I eventually undertook, and which I discuss in this thesis, is thus concerned with the attitudes, behaviours and values which characterise students' and teachers' approaches to advanced literary study. It seeks to clarify some of the ways in which theory, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment inter-relate in the advanced literature classroom, and in particular the ways in which literary and cultural

values are manifest in teachers' and students' approaches to reading, and in the way the process of reading is constructed in courses and syllabuses.

The project takes the form of a case study of the transition between A Level English Literature and university English, focusing on the experience of one class of first year undergraduates and their teachers at a British university. The notion of such a case study emerged from the historical perspective which characterised the initial literature review for the project. Beginning with a desire to understand how A Level English Literature came to be as it is, and how it had adjusted according to the various and changing pedagogical and curricular contexts in which it had found itself, I found that the problematic historical relationship between English Literature as constituted at A Level and as constituted in higher education was a productive focus for examining conflicting understandings of the nature and purpose of literary study, and the theoretical tensions underlying curriculum and pedagogy in school and university English.

Further, it became clear that little extended research has been done into the interactions that take place in the advanced literature classroom, either at A Level or in higher education. Such work, I felt, could throw light not only on the issues underlying debate about the role of context and interpretation in A Level English Literature in the light of Curriculum 2000 and recent discussions about the future of A Level English, but also on broader issues relating to transition and coherence in English at various different levels. In particular, I was concerned that the project should treat the transition between A Level and university English not merely as a local matter, but as a significant contributor in the 'cycle' of English – a key determiner in the progress from student of English to teacher of English.[1]

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[1] I argue here that the transition between A Level and university English is significant because of the disciplinary issues it raises as well as in terms of the actual experience of students in transition (an issue which I discuss further in the final chapter of the thesis). However, in order to establish a statistical context, I here set out comparative data available for 1997, 2000 and 2003, indicating the numbers of students entering for an English subject at A Level, the number entering for English Literature at A Level, and the number accepted to read English as a major element of their degree course in HE:

	A Level English	*(A Level English Lit)*	*HE English*
1997	95,223	61,979	7,621
2000	86,562	53,763	7,521

In choosing to locate the collection of data for the project in the university rather than in the school, I wished not only to examine the implications of A Level English Literature for the university and beyond, by observing the 'product' of A Level English, but also to explore the implications of university English for A Level. I wished to make connections with the thriving discourse that exists about the problematics of texts and reading in the curriculum and pedagogy of university English – for instance in the work of Gerald Graff and Robert Scholes in the United States, and Rob Pope and Ben Knights in the U.K. – which has so far had little impact at A Level; and I wished to explore ways in which the discourses and frameworks of university English – informed by literary theory, linguistics and cultural studies, and already influential in branches of school English such as English Language and Media Studies – might provide appropriate models for future development at A Level.

To introduce the discussion of the research project which forms the bulk of this thesis, I endeavour, in the following section, briefly to outline the broad historical context of the issues outlined above, and to locate within it my own personal and professional experiences of English which motivated the project, as I move towards a fuller account of the formulation of the project and its research questions.

2. A Level English Literature: tensions and origins

Readership and scholarship

The tensions which underlie the relationship between university and school English, and which continue to bring a problematic dynamic to advanced literature classrooms, have their origins in the development of the discipline of English, in which debates about the role and value of literary study have been a central issue from the earliest times. Several well-known accounts[2] tell, for instance, of the initial late nineteenth-

2003	79,774	50,082	8,553

Data on A Level English is taken from AQA Inter-Board Statistics, cited in NATE Post-16 Comittee (2005), p. 56. Data on HE English is taken from the statistical search facility at www.ucas.co.uk.

[2] For instance Palmer (1965), Eagleton (1983), Doyle (1989), Widdowson (1999)

century resistance to English literature as an element of the discipline because of its lack of methodology, its aesthetic and unscientific nature, its problematic position in relation to establishing value in its object of study – in contrast, for instance, with the already established, more historically and linguistically based, disciplines of classics or philology.

Despite this resistance, the study of English Literature did soon become established in universities from the 1880s onwards. It is often suggested in accounts of the origins of the discipline that the high-culture, liberal humanist ideals of Matthew Arnold underpinned the introduction of English Literature as a degree course and influenced its dominant modes of teaching and learning in the university subject, establishing a strongly moral and aesthetic approach to the teaching of literature which would later be developed influentially by F.R. Leavis and 'Cambridge English'. Atherton (2005), in her recent study of the relationship between literary criticism and the study of literature in the university, however, argues that it should not be assumed that Arnold's values were synonymous with the values of the university subject (p.13), drawing an important distinction between the charismatic cultural and literary criticism practised and promoted by men of letters such as Arnold and later Leavis, and the institution of the study of literature in the university, which – throughout its history, and despite some notable exceptions – has tended to emphasise the acquisition of quantifiable knowledge, whether historical, linguistic or theoretical.[3] She points out, for instance, that Arnold had considerable doubts as to whether the study of literature was appropriate for the university, for similar reasons to those of the philologists, and goes on to suggest that literary criticism and culture has, in fact, always been in problematic tension with the scholarly conduct of a university discipline with its need to professionalise and vocationalise knowledge within a clear methodological framework.

One of the main ideas to emerge from Atherton's arguments is that a distinction needs to be made between the influence of literary criticism on the educated general reader in a broad social and cultural context, on the one hand, and its influence on the specialist discipline and the professional scholar in the university on the other. And it is

[3] Leavis was himself a scholar within the university, of course, although, he was perpetually at odds with the university establishment. Atherton points out that many critics of this kind in fact worked within the university after the discipline emerged.

here, she suggests, that we might locate the origins of the current difficulties that exist between literary study as practised at A Level and as practised at university, for it is precisely the tension between the generalist and the specialist, between 'reading' and 'theory', that seem to be at the heart of current tensions, highlighting 'a continuing anxiety about literary criticism and the nature of literary knowledge' (p. 155). It is perhaps also in the confusion between notions of readership and notions of scholarship that the kinds of tension identified by Sinfield in relation to the operations of cultural value in the education system might thrive.

English Literature in the schools

In the years following the first world war, English in schools gradually came under the significant influence of 'Cambridge English.' Leavis's charismatic approach to literary criticism inspired a generation of teachers whose mission – at a time of massive increase in participation in compulsory education – was to bring humane values to students' lives and education through exposure to great literature. It was at the height of this movement, in the years following the Second World War, that, in 1951, the A Level exam, and A Level English Literature, came into being. The Leavisite approach to great works complemented earlier reverence for the canon, but placed greater emphasis on the idea of sensitive, humane appreciation of works rather than on knowledge of the heritage. Arguably, A Level English Literature – fifty years since its inception – is still underpinned by this model.

As literary theory and cultural studies began to establish themselves in the universities and colleges of higher education, critics questioned the privileged position accorded to literature in the university (and in society), and attacked the complacency of a discipline which looked no further than 'the words on the page' (in Leavis's famous words) for its material, rejecting the moral claims made for 'great' literature, and stressing instead a culturally relativistic analysis of the contexts, functions and methods of production of literature and literary texts in society – a field in some ways more akin to linguistics, philosophy and sociology, perhaps, than to the traditional domains of literary study. Here, perhaps, we see – as Atherton argues (ibid., p.154) – another, more extreme, manifestation of the tension between readership and scholarship:

> Academic literary criticism had arrived at a level of specialisation that could only be comprehended by a small circle of readers: the Arnoldian concept of the

> critic as mediating between the text and the educated general public had been left far behind.

As the university discipline moved increasingly towards paradigms of literary theory and cultural analysis, new approaches to school English emerged, in the context of new, culturally and linguistically diverse populations in schools. Inspired to a great extent by the work of James Britton and the 'London School', curriculum and pedagogy was comprehensively re-examined in the light of new understandings about language development and learning processes which stressed the importance of children's personal experiences and responses as the framework for their work in English. In relation to literature, main school English embraced ideas about 'personal growth' and personal response, moving significantly away from the historical canon and towards texts and modes of response which reflected students' lives and concerns more directly. Here again, we see the tension between readership and scholarship in approaches to literature at different levels of the education system.

A Level English Literature has been slow to respond to the changes happening around it. Some significant liberalising moves were made in the 1980s and, more recently, there have been attempts to align the course more closely with the university discipline (all to be examined in detail in the literature review). Arguably, however, the course has responded little to the moves towards a more responsive approach to students' own experiences and values which have characterised changes in secondary education, nor to the moves towards a more theoretical approach to culture and language which have characterised changes in higher education. Yet it might seem that A Level ought to be a vital moment in bringing together these approaches, and in reconciling notions and experiences of readership with notions and experiences of scholarship in literary study, perhaps in the process dealing more openly and satisfactorily with the issues of cultural value raised by Sinfield. As Atherton (ibid., p. 172) puts it:

> … in debates about A Level English Literature, the personal and the academic seem perpetually set at odds, as though there can be no possibility of a growth that occurs because of specialist knowledge, rather than being hindered by it.

3. Teaching A Level English Literature – a personal perspective

Teaching Sixth Form Literature

It is in this context that my own experiences of teaching English led me to become interested in and concerned about the ideological and theoretical tensions which underlie the teaching of English Literature at these different levels of the education system, and in particular about the formulation of A Level English Literature. Issues concerning cultural and literary value, and the nature of student response, in English teaching were prominent from early in my teaching career,[4] and for me emphasised the gap that I experienced between studying English at university (at Cambridge in the mid-1980s, with no literary theory taught) and teaching it at school. At university, there had been no preparation for the teaching of language or literacy, of the media or new technologies, of children's literature or literature from a variety of cultures, of non-literary texts, and so on.[5] There had been no consideration of issues concerning literary value and popular culture, or the nature and purpose of the curriculum or the canon – issues which, as a teacher in a comprehensive school, one immediately comes face to face with both in relation to curriculum formulation and in relation to daily classroom interactions. Nothing in my very traditional, conservative education (independent boys' school; Cambridge University) had prepared me to question the canonical values underpinning my experiences of literature, to interrogate the assumptions underlying my study of literature, or to place the experience in the wider context of English studies.

Although in fact I had experienced considerable angst about the value and purpose of literary study whilst a student, I nevertheless came to teaching with a vague, probably Leavisite, conviction that I wanted to induct young people into the beauties of literature and its transformative processes. This did not stop me from engaging enthusiastically with all other aspects of English teaching, but it did mean that with A Level English Literature, I could rest on more familiar ground – the explication and discussion of more-or-less canonical literary texts with a group of students who would, by and large, unquestioningly accept the worth of the texts being studied and the

[4] I started teaching in an 11-18 comprehensive school in 1989 and have taught in 11-18 comprehensives since.

[5] These are issues which are still pressing for many English teachers – an issue I will address in more detail in the next chapters.

activity of studying them. But even there, the teaching situation raised troublesome issues, and it is these issues which – still problematic today – eventually emerged to motivate my research.

A Level English Literature demands that students 'appreciate' the texts they study. But did these students *genuinely* find these texts interesting or valuable? Were these the kinds of texts that they would read privately? Or were they just studying them because they needed to pass an exam? And did that matter? What kind of responses might be authentic, valuable responses? Of what value was a personal response if it was not an authentic one? What was the value of a personal response, and was this the same as an appreciation? What was the difference between personal and critical response? What was the meaning of the 'appreciation' of literary texts if such appreciation was simply a technical operation intended to fulfil the function of perpetuating canonical values through the transmission of cultural heritage? What, for them, would be the purpose of studying these texts other than to gain a qualification? What kind of knowledge and understanding were students gaining from this study? What was I actually trying to achieve through the teaching of these texts? I knew, from my experience of teaching and talking with students, that the nature of their engagement with literature was problematic in terms of the relative values assigned to the texts and to the study by teacher, students and syllabuses. I did not find it possible to accept that an unproblematic induction into 'great literature' was an adequate rationale for my work, although that was essentially what was demanded by the A Level course and accepted by my department.

Some of the major theoretical issues underlying these questions began to become clearer to me as my career progressed. I became aware of – and sometimes taught – alternative models of textual and cultural study which helped me to develop my ideas about A Level Literature and the nature of the literature curriculum. I began to perceive more clearly the problematic nature of literature in the curriculum, for instance in relation to media and non-literary texts, and wider issues of cultural and linguistic value. Film and Media Studies A Levels, for instance, foregrounded issues of cultural production and reception - genre, narrative, representation, institution and technology, for instance – in its approaches to text, whilst English Language A Level took an analytical linguistic approach to all types of text, not privileging one above another. I began to perceive that these subjects might be providing students with

valuable critical frameworks that appeared to be missing from English Literature. I also sensed that these frameworks enabled students both to achieve distance from the object of their study and to place their own cultural and linguistic experiences and values in the context of a broad understanding of culture and language in society.

In A Level English Literature, on the other hand, I found that syllabuses focused mainly on the atomistic study of a small number of individual texts, with an emphasis on the craft of the author – plot, theme, characterisation, use of language. There was no formal location for a consideration of the kind of definitional and conceptual issues, the epistemological frameworks which film, media and language study, for instance, deal explicitly with. Such questions as 'What is literature? What is the relationship between literature and society? What is the relationship between literature and other media? What is the relationship between literature and literary study?' were thus easily, and frequently, neglected. (Indeed, I have even heard it argued that asking such questions might prove detrimental to students who are attempting to focus on the far narrower concerns of the A Level specifications.) Furthermore, the assessment regime for A Level Literature was narrowly focused on the comprehensive close reading of the set texts, with little emphasis on understanding of wider cultural contexts, or on comparative and generic understanding, and an exclusive emphasis on response in the form of the traditional critical essay.[6]

Many A Level students seemed to me to be often very uncertain about the cultural contexts, purposes and values of their study of literature, and I sensed that they might want and be able to step intellectually beyond the bounds of the narrow textual study they were usually engaged in, to ask these broader questions and examine these broader issues – in fact, to begin to enter the realms of literary and cultural theory. Yet A Level English Literature barely acknowledged these issues.

I found myself able to reflect further on some of these questions in the light of my experience of teaching the International Baccalaureate, an alternative model for sixth

[6] I discuss some of these issues more fully in Snapper (Snapper, 2006a) using the film *Dead Poets Society* as a starting point.

form literature teaching.[7] Whilst it is in many ways still a fairly conservative model, the relatively open approach of the I.B. English course towards text choice and assessment method, as well as its broad aims and its international ethos, provide opportunities for teachers to move away from A Level modes. Teaching a text as part of a broader theme, or as part of a genre study, or as part of a cultural study, is a different proposition from teaching a text in the solipsistic mode hitherto generally encouraged by A Level; the I.B. mode privileges and foregrounds contextual understanding, and to some extent clarifies the structures and purposes of literary study for both teachers and students. The emphasis on cultural understanding, especially through the 'World Literature' element of the programme, enabled me, for instance, to teach broadly around the theme of post-colonial literature in both Africa and Britain, (exploring with students a range of inter-related ideas about literature, language, culture, politics and society, as well as a range of related texts.[8] It enabled me to begin to develop a vision of how the study of literature might more profoundly deal with issues of cultural difference and value at this level.

Curriculum 2000 and the universities: towards a research project

My experiences of teaching English at A Level and in the International Baccalaureate increasingly led me to a consideration of the relationship between the formulation of English at different levels of the education system, and in particular between English Literature as an A Level subject and English as a discipline in Higher Education. Robert Eaglestone's book *Doing English* (2000), an exploration of the difference between English at A Level and at university aimed at first year undergraduates, was influential in suggesting that the new paradigms of university English might provide a means of further exploring the possibility of the kind of culturally responsive practice I had been experimenting with in literature teaching in the sixth form.

At this time, too, the advent of Curriculum 2000 – from its inception by the new Labour government in 1997 – fortuitously opened up a debate about the nature of A Level English (which I describe in detail in the literature review). Central to this debate, and to my own concerns, lay the question of the relationship between English in HE

[7]The second school I taught at, from 1993 onwards, also an 11-18 comprehensive school, offered both the International Baccalaureate and A Level in its Sixth Form. The I.B. is the only alternative to A Level available in England as a standard route to university entrance; it is offered, however, in only about 100 schools.

[8] For a fuller account of these experiences, see Snapper (2004; 2006b)

and English at A Level and the tensions between the paradigms of reading and textual study which pertain at each, with particular emphasis on ideas about the roles of context and interpretation in literary study.

In her book about the actualisation of ideology in the literature classroom, *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English,* McCormick (1994) addresses some of these issues about the development of cultural understanding through literary study and the tensions between different paradigms of literary education by giving an account of three models of reading that can inform relationships in teaching literature – the cognitive model (loosely, transmission approaches); the expressive model (loosely, personal response / reader response approaches); and the social-cultural model (loosely, critical literacy / cultural analysis approaches). Locating the traditions of school literature teaching in the former two approaches, she suggests that the third, social-cultural, model is under-privileged:

> Readers are socially constructed, interdiscursive subjects, yet not without agency, balanced between determinism and autonomy. They are neither the blank slates that the objectivist positions maintain nor the autonomous subjects of the expressivist model. Texts are neither containers of meaning nor infinitely pliable, but are, rather, always 'in use'…: they are produced under determinate conditions, not read 'faithfully' or solely from a personal perspective (p.60)…
>
> Although I certainly do not advocate that culturally-informed theories of the reader and the text be taught directly and wholesale to all students. I do believe that such theories need to be seen as being as automatically relevant as cognitive or expressive theories when it is time to develop pedagogies for the teaching of reading in the schools and universities. While so often the schools and the universities seem quite separate…, if… teachers and researchers in the universities begin to engage in more active dialogue with the developers of reading and writing programmes and the teachers who have to teach students – young and older – 'how' to read and write, it might be possible to begin to change the dominant significations of reading in the schools, so that more students could begin to learn to read the world simultaneously with learning to read the word (pp. 63-4).

Here, McCormick suggests that reconciliations between school and university English could hold the key to resolving some of the tensions in the negotiation of texts and textual value which I had experienced in the classroom. In moving towards a research project, I wanted to understand more about the ways in which these tensions – for instance, between reading and scholarship in literary study, between the personal and the critical, and between text and context – are enshrined in courses and played out in the classroom. I wanted to understand more about the motivations, values and

attitudes of students and teachers in engaging with literary study, and in relation to the teaching and learning processes which constitute the study. I also wanted to learn more about students' experience of the notoriously difficult transition between A Level and university English, and to be able to test my experiences of and assumptions about literature teaching against those of teachers in the university.[9]

4. A study of transition: research questions and the shape of the thesis

From these starting points emerged the following research questions to guide my literature review, and, later, the formulation of an empirical study.[10]

The principal research question was:

- *What issues, in relation to the theoretical and conceptual framework of literary study, do first year undergraduates and their lecturers engage with in the transition between secondary and higher English?*

I focused my investigation with two subsidiary questions:

- *What kinds of theoretical and conceptual understanding does A Level equip students with, and how do these develop and change during the first year undergraduate course?*
- *What are lecturers' and students' attitudes to and perceptions of A Level English, university English and the transition between them?*

[9] I have argued in this section that English Literature A Level offers less assistance to the student in relation to cognitive frameworks than the other subjects in the English family, and have suggested that the transition between A Level English Literature and university English is particularly difficult. It is necessary to stress here, however, that many of the generic issues of transition – including the assimilation of cognitive frameworks, but also ranging from the mastering of learning styles to the understanding of 'threshold' concepts (Meyer and Land 2003) – are indeed common to many subjects, and there is a significant literature dealing with these issues. Nevertheless, the main focus of this thesis is disciplinary issues specific to English Literature as they relate to A Level - HE transition, rather than a detailed examination of the broader, generic issues of A Level - HE transition.

[10] The formulation of the research questions is discussed in more detail in the methodology chapter.

I added a further subsidiary question later, when approaching my empirical study:

- *What curricular and pedagogical strategies are employed within the HE course selected for study to support students' transition from A Level to university English?*

Guided by these questions, my literature review comprises a historical study of the debates concerning A Level English and its relation to university English, which have their origins almost in the beginnings of A Level, and which inform present issues of transition. As I have already indicated, the eventual form of my research is a case study of the transition between A Level and university English, with an empirical study of one first year university English class as the central focus of the project. Aiming to explore further the tensions and connections between English at A Level and at university, I followed one first year university class for one year, attending all their core seminars and lectures, and interviewing both students and lecturers.

Whilst the starting point for this thesis is a historical study of the debate surrounding the Literature curriculum and an investigation of the actualisation of that curriculum in the classroom, the shape of the thesis and the formulation of the research questions recognises the way in which approaches to teaching and learning continually assert themselves in relation to the content of the curriculum.

The shape of the thesis

This submission comprises, in addition to this introduction (Chapter 1), an account of the literature review (Chapters 2, 3 and 4), methodological work (Chapter 5) and data analysis (Chapter 6) undertaken as part of this study, followed by a discussion of my findings (Chapter 7).

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 comprise a report on the literature review. This review is focused on the domestic discourse about the study of literature at A Level and its relationship with the broader curriculum, and in particular with the study of literature at university. I set out to give an account of the development of the A Level English course, and the debates which took place around it, from John Dixon's 1979 work with the Schools Council until the current controversies about the future of 14-19 reform. The first part gives an account of early debates about the nature of A Level Literature in the

light of radical changes in English Studies in universities in the 1970s and 80s. The second part explores tensions and developments in the relationship between school and university English in the 1980s and 90s. The third part examines recent developments in A Level Literature, and in the transition between A Level and university English, in the light of trends in the reform of 14-19 education.

Chapter 5 outlines the methodological workings of the research project, describing its origins in ideas emerging from the literature review, the formulation of research questions, the identification of a location for the project, the design of research instruments, and the resolution of a number of issues concerning ethics and validity. I examine the relationship of this study to other work in the field, in particular focusing on the value of the work in presenting an in-depth study of transition at this level, adopting a multi-layered case study approach. I also discuss the teacher-researcher's perspective which characterises the study.

Chapter 6 goes on to present and comment on a selection of the data gathered. In the first section, I give an account of my observation of the core lectures and seminars of the first year undergraduate course, examining the structure of the course and the modules which constitute it, the pedagogical strategies employed by lecturers, and the visible responses of students to those strategies. I focus in particular on two seminars and two lectures in the second module, a module on literary theory, placing these events in the context of my other observations. In the second section, I give an account of the interviews I conducted with both lecturers and students, aiming to illuminate my observations of work in class through ascertaining their reflections on these events, and through exploring their attitudes to and motivations in the work.

In the final chapter, Chapter 7, I summarise my findings in relation both to the context of the university in which the study took place, and of the A Level course from which the students in the study emerged. First, I examine the institutional context of the university and the A Level course, and the disciplinary context of the English curriculum at both levels, suggesting ways in which the structures and routines of these two locations might determine aspects of the experience of teaching and learning in English studies. Second, I seek to draw together elements of the way in which pedagogy and curriculum are played out in classrooms and lecture theatres at both A Level and in the university, reflecting separately on the experience and approach of

lecturers and of students. Finally, I identify the need for the development of particular approaches to reading as a major focus in the transition between A Level and HE English, and discuss implications for the development of mutually supportive curricula and strategies for teaching and learning in both phases.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW (1)
THE CHALLENGE TO A LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

In the introduction to this thesis, I identified the problematic relationship between the paradigms of literary study at A Level and university level as a potentially valuable focus for examining tensions surrounding aspects of the teaching of literature. In the three chapters of Literature Review that follow, I examine the representation in professional literature of the relationship between English Literature A Level and university English over the last twenty-five years, against a background of internal professional debates and external government policy shifts. The central focus of the review is an analysis of the debate within the English teaching profession during this period about the nature of English at A Level, aimed at establishing more clearly the parameters of the problem, and the positions adopted by commentators in both sectors. In particular, I focus on issues relating to the nature of reading in literary study, and its relationship with criticism and theory, especially as manifest in the debate about the role of 'context and interpretation' in A Level English Literature, as well as related issues of curriculum and pedagogy.

The review is presented in three chapters. In this first chapter, I give an account of the debate surrounding challenges to A Level English Literature which arose in the 1980s from within the secondary schools. In the second chapter, I examine the literature on the relationship between university and sixth form English during the same period, and up to the current decade. In the third chapter, I return to the A Level debate, examining perspectives on the changes to A Level English Literature which took place as part of Curriculum 2000, and briefly looking at the implications, for English A Level and the transition to English Studies at university, of the Tomlinson Report on 14-19 Reform and subsequent revisions to A Level English Literature which come into effect in 2008.[11]

This first chapter identifies the period from 1979 to 1993 as crucial for the development of progressive approaches to the teaching of literature in the sixth form,

[11] A shortened version of this literature review is published as Snapper (2007).

and focuses particularly on the professional discourses which took place in the pages of the English teaching journals during this period.

Re-examining English 16-19

The first major challenges to the traditional formulation of the subject in the sixth form arose from the work of the Schools Council's English 16-19 project (1975-78), and John Dixon's influential report (1979) on the project, a wide-ranging survey of the state of the subject based on extensive interviews and development work with teachers and students across the country, and the analysis of exam syllabuses, exam papers and student responses. Dixon's comprehensive report, with its wide evidence base, was the starting point for much of the development work done in sixth form literature teaching over the next two decades, and the inspiration for many of the calls for change. A second major text on English in the sixth form followed, two years later: Adams & Hopkins (1981) solidly reinforced Dixon's analyses and recommendations, using a narrower range of more detailed case studies to support their arguments.

Dixon – one of the leading voices in the early years of NATE and an advocate of student-centred approaches to a broad conception of literature – sets his report on the Schools Council project against the background of the rapid expansion in the number of students entering further education from the 1970s, identifying the need for a broad-based but flexible qualification in English which provides a mixture of academic, vocational, and social education for all. He criticises the failure of A Level English to incorporate the study of a wider range of modes of reading, writing and oral communication, or to build on the innovative work done in schools since the 1960s – and in some cases, earlier – on the development of drama education and media studies, pointing to the benefits these had brought in terms of the study of 'modes of communication' and 'contemporary culture and society' (pp. 19-20).

Dixon expresses the view that 'the balance between general and specialist interests is the heart of the problem of defining examination syllabuses' at this level, and that 'if the mode of assessment is entirely designed in the interests of the scholarly preparation of the 4 per cent who go on to read honours English, they and the remaining 96 per cent stand to suffer from the relative inattention to the broader humanistic possibilities in the course' (p. 49). Attending specifically to existing A Level Literature syllabuses, he argues for a more student-centred philosophy, decrying the lack of attention to what

students themselves choose to read and why, and – following an analysis of students' exam answers – he points to the failure of exam questions to elicit genuine personal responses.

Elsewhere in the report, Dixon gives an account of the project's involvement in the establishment of the first A Level alternative to English Literature, Communication Studies, which was introduced in 1979, (shortly to be followed by the first English Language syllabuses in 1981). For the first time, in these syllabuses, the study of a wide range of written and visual texts, media texts and oral communications, and their relationship with language, society and culture, became possible in the sixth form, in a syllabus which also made use of a range of forms of assessment. Widely adopted in Further Education colleges, where the study of communications in various forms had already been well established in vocational courses, A Level Communications, Dixon argued, was a challenging 'general' syllabus which provided a valuable escape route for those who wanted to continue to study English, but not to specialise in literature; however, the existence of Communications and Language as A Level subjects did not solve the problem of the need to develop a broad-based English syllabus, or to reform the teaching of literature.

The division between the academic and the vocational in 16-19 education remained a frequent complaint by many in the teaching profession in the years to come, although successive governments continued to shelve the issue. In the realm of secondary English, members of LATE, the London Association for the Teaching of English (Leggett & Raleigh, 1984) proposed an integration of the English 16-19 curriculum based both on a desire to bring together the academic and vocational levels of the subject, and to reunite literature and language. Pointing out the narrowness of English A Level on the one hand, ('narrow, ineffable and almost entirely unresponsive to the changes in scope and method of English teaching (and literary criticism) which have taken place in the last fifteen years or so' (p. 30)) and the banal functionality of many pre-vocational Communications courses on the other, the article sets out a vision for an English and Communication syllabus which would provide a 'common basis' for the subject at 16-19, along the lines of that which was shortly to evolve from the bringing together of O Level and CSE to form GCSE. The proposal envisages all students undertaking 'a core of common activities' in five categories: 'Talk and Discussion,' 'Reading and Response,' 'Research and Evaluation,' 'Language Study' and 'Writing.'

However, given the highly conjectural nature of such ideas, in a 16-19 curriculum which remained firmly divided between the vocational and the academic on the one hand and between language and literature on the other, the debate about A Level focused largely on calls for the reform of the literature course. In particular, progressive voices within the profession were increasingly to be heard, at this time, exploring in depth the faults of A Level English Literature, along similar lines to Dixon.

Re-examining A Level English Literature

Daw (1986), amplifying Dixon's critique of the exam, for instance, outlines three main problem areas in A Level English Literature. First, 'the type of texts chosen and their appropriateness for the 16-19 age group' (p. 63). He criticises the A Level's 'unrealistic attempt at an inclusive coverage of the canon, presumably to prepare that minority of students who will eventually enter degree courses in English Literature', to the neglect of 'the very real difficulties encountered by pupils from less literary backgrounds,' pointing out the deleterious effect on motivation and authenticity of response that such a strategy results in, and suggesting that ' any syllabus which consists only of the major works of 'great' writers encourages a view that the work of discrimination has already been done' (p. 64).The course, he says, fails to assimilate recent influential research on reading which suggests that students need to build on their existing reading knowledge and experience to progress through 'an active recreative process' of reading.

Second, 'the degree of relatedness between the texts covered' (p. 64). Here, Daw comments on the failure of the syllabus to explore genre or 'the development of literature within a wider historical or cultural framework' because of the 'apparently arbitrary selection of texts,' arguing that 'the impression of unrelatedness between texts, or between texts and anything else, must remain strong for most pupils' (p. 65). Furthermore, the small number of texts studied leads to 'a microscopic concentration on a very narrow range of texts.'

Finally, 'the nature of the examination itself' (p. 65). Daw argues that the lack of time and the prohibition against taking the text into the exam encourage 'an excessive degree of memorising… as a substitute for understanding, and renders almost impossible any fresh response to the text.' He also criticises the 'generality and

abstraction' of the exam questions, their emphasis on 'the intentionality of the author, their tendency to require 'appreciation' rather than 'judgement of the value of the work,' and the exclusive reliance on the critical essay as the form of response, with the consequent lack of opportunity to respond creatively - 'often the most sensitive gauge with which to measure response' (p. 66).

A number of writers additionally point out the particular issues which the Anglo-centric A Level canon raised in schools with heavily multi-cultural intakes. Traves (1984) for instance, criticises the limited opportunities that exist either for the study of authors from a variety of cultures or for an extended approach to literature 'whose context of production reflects cultural plurality or cultural conflict' (p. 248), whilst Cosway (1987) argues – following an analysis of black and white students' responses to Asian literature - that the implementation of a 'multi-ethnic approach' could help to reverse the 'cultural advantage' (p. 54) that white students have in a course consisting mainly of literature by white Anglo-American writers.

These critiques of A Level Literature reveal a number of recurring issues to do with the construction of disciplinary knowledge in the subject and, strongly related, the nature of student response. Culture seems to be a uniting theme. Dixon and Daw suggest that students' 'personal', 'authentic' and 'genuine' responses are not sufficiently valued, and their own reading cultures – their reading experiences and backgrounds – not represented in the course content and assessment. Cosway's comments, however, suggest that white Anglo-Americans are, in fact, culturally advantaged, relative to those of different cultural origins. Both Traves and Cosway seem to argue for extended approaches which objectify questions of culture to a greater degree, perhaps qualifying, to some extent, the notion of personal response validated by Dixon and Daw.[12]

[12] Daw also, however, seems to call for a greater objectivity in the construction of the subject with his comments on the unsatisfactory assemblage of texts in the course, and Dixon indirectly endorses such an approach through his approval of the more theoretical Communication Studies course. It is interesting that Daw, in later writing (Daw 1996, 1997), moves to a position more explicitly in support of 'critical' response, to be discussed in the next chapter.

Re-examining response and assessment

The question of the nature of literary response in the sixth form, raised by all these critics, had received its first in-depth treatment in Dixon and Brown's (1984) report on a Schools Council study of 400 exam and coursework essays which were analysed in detail for evidence of a 'genuine encounter with texts'. The dominance of the critical essay as a form of response here comes in for particular criticism. Dixon – arguing in a related article (1984) that students' responses need to be encouraged in the form of modes of writing (such as narrative and exploratory) that enable them to form personal responses more effectively – suggests that the study showed that 'half the students taking A Level Literature may be getting little or nothing from their course' (p. 21). Dixon also appeals to the exam boards to be more transparent in their assessment processes so that teachers can more effectively teach the writing processes involved in the critical essay.[13]

Practical criticism as a major component of the course also came in for scrutiny. Mathieson (1985), in a wide-ranging examination of the model of reading offered by practical criticism, comments, on the practical criticism exam, that it raises 'the central question of what it means to study literature when we are still deeply confused about the relationship between affective response and cognitive knowledge in English' (p. ii). Barnes and Barnes (1984) comment that the critical essay examinations result 'in the evaluation of personal values in writing and literature through examinations which reward detached performances and inert knowledge of books, a strange paradox' (p. 388), whilst Protherough (1993) addresses the problem of response and assessment succinctly when he asks whether there is 'any point in laboriously teaching how to construct answers that give to an outsider a convincing appearance of honesty and spontaneity' especially when 'response is seen in quite unproblematic terms as something that an author creates' (p. 11).

Mathieson, the Barnes's and Protherough, again, all identify the problematic tension between the personal - 'affective response' - and the objective - 'cognitive knowledge' - suggesting, perhaps, that the A Level's attempt at combining the two succeeds in dealing with neither effectively. Pound (1996), meanwhile, undertaking a study of the

[13] In fact, the Joint Matriculation Board had already, for the first time, published a collection of annotated exam responses the previous year (Lapworth, 1983)

framing of A Level exam questions as the central project of his PhD thesis, starkly demonstrates this tension. Reflecting on the increasing importance of personal response through the history of the A Level, but also the limitations of the exam boards' interpretations of personal response, he cites, for instance, a 1972 question which asks students to 'show that [they] have *come to see* [my italics] the qualities of Jane Austen's writing' (p. 110). Although this is admittedly a form of question almost certainly completely phased out in the last twenty years, it could be argued that the requirement to show exactly that kind of 'appreciation' is still fundamental to all A Level Literature exam questions and exemplifies an underlying confusion between response and knowledge; the word 'appreciation' itself, frequently used in literature examinations until recently, strongly implies an underlying network of dominant values which clearly might be at odds with the expression of both 'affective response' and 'cognitive knowledge'.

The type of thinking which produces such a situation is seen in an article by Pryor (1985); complaining about the lack of transparency in assessment and the perversity of examiners in setting over-complex questions, she writes (p.14), apparently without irony:

> What examiners have forgotten to do is to maintain their own sense of the simple objectives that apply. In my view, A Level candidates should be taught to enjoy reading literature. If the teaching is successful, there will be no need to give further training in answering A Level questions. If, on the other hand, they are asked to 'criticise' the writing of Jane Austen or to 'interpret' the psychological meanings of Shakespeare, they will not only be incapable of doing so without help, they will be damaged by the attempt – perhaps discouraged from reading these and other authors for life.

In her own study of the framing of questions, Butler (1987a) addresses the tension between knowledge and response from a more subtle perspective. She points to the way questions 'frequently ask candidates to evaluate texts in terms other than their own responses' (p.44) and to 'take on the viewpoint of a kind of composite reader' (p.43). In this article she – in common with a number of other writers at this time – emphasises the processes of reader response in literature teaching by drawing on the work of reader response theorists, in particular Iser and Rosenblatt. In another article (Butler, 1987b) for instance, through her exploration of three post-A Level students' responses to reading, she attempts to show the importance of personal and imaginative involvement in determining reader response at this level. By interviewing the students about their perceptions of reading and literature in relation to the A Level

course, she attempts to demonstrate that 'students' affective responses are … fundamental to their ability to realise the potentialities of texts and to evaluate the experience the text represents to them' (p. 38).

Observing that 'many English teachers are still seeing A Level English in terms of communicating a body of knowledge and developing students' powers of argument rather than encouraging them to explore and evaluate their real responses', Butler warns that 'if English Literature as it is perceived by teachers and reading as it is perceived by students are different animals, something is surely wrong' (p. 41). Here the 'knowledge/response' binary is expressed also as 'Literature/reading' – another recurring theme in debate about the literature curriculum. Butler is surely right that at some level these must be reconciled; however, it is not clear that the rather solipsistic position she advocates can achieve such a reconciliation; where, for instance, does the idea of *critical* response fit in this analysis?

The alternative syllabuses

At around this time, a small-scale initiative begun by the Schools Council project in 1976, and described by Dixon in his report, brought about the opportunity to explore and possibly resolve some of these tensions, and allowed some changes to happen in all three problem areas of A Level Literature practice identified by Daw. Dixon's project had enabled teachers, if they wished and with the support of examination boards, to adopt 'alternative syllabuses', whereby one third of the course could be designed, and assessed through coursework, by individual schools. Greenwell (1988), in a booklet published by the NATE Post-16 committee, set out a survey of current alternative syllabuses with the intention of 'giving an impetus to the development of new syllabuses by showing what is available' (p. 6). Such syllabuses were clearly felt to be the immediate way forward by progressive teachers, allowing the teaching of texts in more interesting contexts, a broader choice of texts, and more sympathetic assessment opportunities, than traditional syllabuses. By 1985, Greenwell says, over 9% of schools were teaching alternative syllabuses, and the proportion is assumed to have risen to well above 10% by 1988.

Where schools opted for progressive approaches, they provided interesting syllabus models, despite having to accommodate to the strictures of the supervising exam board. Newport Free Grammar School's course was entitled 'Natural Order, Social

Convention, Individual Life: A Language Course' and consisted of a study of literature relating to the institution of marriage from Chaucer to the present day, designed to link coursework study with the study of set texts for the traditional part of the syllabus. (pp. 25-26). Elsewhere in the syllabuses, contextual approaches, where they existed, were generally offered in the form of a single 'area of study' (including 'Colonialism and Identity,' 'History into Literature,' and 'New Commonwealth Writing') or period or genre study. Approaches to assessment included oral assessment (both formal and informal tasks), the assessment of creative writing and wide reading, open-book examinations, and the extended essay or project – sometimes giving students their own choice of topic from a wide range of literary and linguistic possibilities. Whilst the core texts used tended to be very much part of the established canon, some schools clearly took the opportunity to be adventurous, with one school, for instance, listing John Cooper Clarke, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell and John Lennon, along with Hardy, Auden and Dylan Thomas, around the 'core text' of Larkin's poetry (p. 60); and many schools seemed to be building their courses around extensive wide reading. Indeed, these syllabuses incorporated all the features which had been so heartily recommended by Dixon in 1979.[14]

Thus, in some of the major respects for which the traditional A Level Literature had been criticised – the narrowness of its canon and the small number of texts covered, the divide between literary study on the one hand and language study and original writing on the other, the restricted and inappropriate nature of its assessment

[14] The most popular and influential of the alternatives was the AEB 660 syllabus, still sorely missed by many today, which eventually allowed 50% coursework. Hodgson (1995) testifies to the critical and creative energy which was unleashed by this syllabus, giving examples of the range of reading and styles of writing represented in coursework. A representative list of coursework essays, individually chosen and researched by students, includes a comparison of the autobiography of Malcolm X, *Beloved* and the poems of Grace Nichols; an essay on Stephen King's portrayal of small-town America in three novels; a study of Edith Wharton as a feminist writer; a comparison of five works (including non-fiction) portraying life in a totalitarian society; a study of children's readings of A.A, Milne and Lewis Carroll; and a study of banned and censored literature, focusing on *Satanic Verses*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Meanwhile, creative writing approaches include 'An Environmental Proposal by Nirex', based on Swift's 'Modest Proposal'; the use of a minor character in one play as a major one in another, after *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; an Ode, after reading Keats; and additional dialogue, in the style of Harold Pinter, occurring offstage in *The Caretaker*.

methods, and the incoherence of its syllabuses – a number of alternative syllabuses, to a limited extent, led the way in changing practice.

The extent to which alternative syllabuses changed things, however, should not be over-estimated. Greenwell's survey shows that, although progressive approaches were plentiful amongst the syllabuses, many were highly traditional in terms of content and some in terms of their means of assessment, with many teachers simply wanting more autonomy, rather than adopting new models. Greenwell himself comments that 'the innovations recorded in this handbook add up to comparatively little. What is most striking is the conservatism of boards and teachers…' (p. 83). Hackman (1990) also points to the workload issues involved in setting up and continuing such syllabuses, with their teacher-designed and teacher-assessed modules, and with the onus on schools to approach exam boards for certification.

The culmination of the alternative syllabus movement came in the form of Hackman's proposal, in the same article, for an 80% coursework A Level Literature syllabus which was based on many of the features of the existing alternative syllabuses – a proposal submitted shortly before the government's 1991 clampdown, by which coursework allowances were reduced (to 20%), alternative syllabuses banned, and the traditional syllabuses once again became compulsory.[15]

In the classroom

The reasons suggested by Greenwell and Hackman for the low take-up of the alternative syllabuses hint at workload issues, and conservatism amongst teachers in relation to the A Level course. One must certainly consider that, whilst the 1980s saw a proliferation of calls in the English teaching journals for the progressive development of A Level Literature content and pedagogy, the consensus, sense of purpose, and enthusiasm of the writers published in the journals at this time may, for a variety of reasons, not have been representative of the overall constituency of English teachers. Indeed, a telling picture of the reality of the state of A Level Literature teaching in the classroom was provided by a 1986 HMI survey of A Level Literature teaching (HMI, 1986).

[15] To be discussed in the concluding section of this chapter.

The HMI report paints an unhappy picture, commenting on the common presence of 'teacher monologue… sometimes reading from old and inappropriate lecture notes', 'dreary reading around the class, punctuated by glosses from the teacher', 'narrow expositions…where ideas were delivered at the pace of the slowest student's handwriting,' 'narrow or obscure' teacher questioning 'with a preconceived notion of the correct answer,' 'line by line paraphrase,' and 'a narrow concentration on essay and context question to the exclusion of other activities,' (cited in Scott (1989) p. 99). In this hellish vision, one can see clearly why many critics at this time saw 'response' as oppositional with 'knowledge'.

Two years earlier, Barnes and Barnes (1984) had reported a similar situation in their pioneering study of 'how the English curriculum is realised in classroom interaction through the interplay of ideology with practical exigencies.' Their comments on their observations of A Level classes in four different schools conclude with the following summary of three of the four classes:

> In the majority of lessons the teaching conformed to an unbroken transmission mode: the pupils were passive receivers of instruction that transmitted a single interpretation of set books, and the teachers did not treat that interpretation as negotiable nor set out to teach a model of literary criticism which would equip the students to be readers of other works. The influence of the examination was omnipresent … Even within the values and preconceptions of literary criticism, the teaching of these three courses cannot be seen as a healthy state of affairs. (p. 395)[16]

Scott (1989) argues that the HMI survey illustrates 'the lack of any consensus about what the subject is or how it should be taught' (p. 15) when it comments that 'many schools did not have a coherence in their work and there was often a disconcerting range of methods and expectations in the students,' and that 'there was the tacit assumption in departments that teachers were working with common and agreed aims which did not need specific discussion,' (cited in Scott p. 15). He remarks that 'it is not unreasonable to speculate that in some departments steps are being taken actively to avoid the kind of discussion that is being proposed by HMI' in order to avoid

[16] Ten years after the HMI survey, Leahy-Dios (1996), in her PhD thesis study of A Level Literature classes, also found that lessons were 'dominated by translation and transmission models of literature teaching' (p. 85) and that there was 'little evidence that in literature classes imagination is nourished and exercised, and even less that it aims at cultural, social and political awareness' (p. 188), and similar findings were reported by Hardman and Leat (1998).

'ideological warfare' (p. 16), acknowledging the experience of many departments, in which the specialised and esoteric status of the sixth form curriculum, and the scope for the independence and autonomy of the sixth form teacher within the department, relative to the main school curriculum, leads to an unquestioned assumption that individual teachers know how to approach A Level Literature by dint of their university training in literature and the fact that they sat the exam themselves, as well as a corresponding lack of departmental and in-service training relating to A Level teaching.[17]

Traves (1984) reflects on these issues when, in an account of the work done in his school to develop 'a whole-school approach to literature teaching,' including the sixth form, he comments (p. 244) that teachers often feel that they are 'on safer ground' with A Level, which 'seems to be closer to their own experience of higher education,' and that:

> The fact that teachers often look upon A Level as a welcome break from lower school work suggests that there may not be much continuity in their literature teaching. It would seem that A Level brings about the end of most of the practices that make up our experience of lower-school, mixed-ability classes.

The issue of the uncertain theoretical basis and insecure continuum of the literature curriculum, as well as of the inconsistent education of teachers themselves and the lack of opportunity for teachers to develop complex ideas about their pedagogy had been raised in an *English Magazine* editorial (English and Media Centre, 1980):

> What principles should direct the study of literature? For English teachers who have been doing the job for a while, the answers to that question provided by their own college or university courses might be fast receding. Some may feel that the answers were also rather faint or unresolved; and some that the question was never raised, explicitly or otherwise. In any case do the principles that might inform H.E. courses apply to the study of literature in the very different conditions of schools? And are the principles the same for 11 year olds in mixed ability classes as for 18 year olds in A Level Literature classes – even though the practices are different? These are large issues; the opportunities for secondary English teachers to consider them are usually small (p. 4).

Such questions perhaps reflected a widespread feeling of unsettledness and even apprehension within the secondary teaching community concerning the teaching of literature at this time. Dixon (1979), outlining the criticism English Literature exams

[17] Barnes and Barnes (1984) also comment on the tendency of A Level Literature teachers to be the senior male members of a department.

had attracted since the beginning of the Higher Certificate in 1921, had also voiced this feeling, when he commented, along the same lines: 'These are comments on the 'qualifications' that gained the vast majority of us in English teaching entry to college and university,' and asks: 'How can those who have accommodated to such a system in the past rescue themselves now?' (p.42).[18]

Developing pedagogy

One of the results of the HMI survey was to prompt a wider promulgation of ideas about student-centred pedagogy in the teaching of literature – already common in 11-16 English – with the primary aim of encouraging and developing the personal responses and imaginative engagement of students, rather than the parroting of teacher-inculcated views. Indeed, the success of such approaches at GCSE (as well as the greater numbers going into the sixth form) was increasingly cited as a reason why the transfer between GCSE and A Level might be particularly difficult for students. Thomas (1990), for example, in his study of pastiche as an A Level textual approach, comments that GCSE students have been 'encouraged to engage with the fictions they have encountered, not as reverent observers attempting to reach a formal objectivity… but as imaginative penetrators of the fictive world of their study' (p. 51).

A number of other articles at this time explored methods of enabling A Level students to engage imaginatively with literature. For instance, Jackson (1986) wrote of the way in which a scholarly view of poetry had, since the nineteenth century, divorced the study of it from its oral tradition, and encouraged a greater emphasis on poems in the vernacular mode, both modern and traditional. Thomas (1986), similarly, gave an account of a drama-centred approach to Shakespeare at A Level, aiming to redress the imbalance of an overly literary view of the Bard. Shaw (1990) explored the critical insights which can result from exploring literary texts through making films and storyboards. All these strategies echoed developments in 11-16 teaching which both engaged students in creative activity and set literature in a variety of textual and cultural contexts.

[18] On the other hand, the conservatism of a sizeable constituency of English teachers, educated in the Leavisite tradition themselves, must not be under-estimated, especially at this time, before substantial numbers of graduates who had studied linguistic or literary theory began to enter the profession.

Ogborn (1984) was perhaps the first to publish a wide-ranging account of a variety of student-centred teaching approaches for A Level, with advice on course planning, class reading, encouragement of response, note-making, teacher intervention, and written work. Two years after the HMI survey, the NATE Post-16 Committee (1988) published a guide to A Level literature teaching, which, echoing Daw's misgivings about the nature of the examination, provides an encyclopaedic range of approaches 'in an attempt to reunite the divide between critical and creative modes that has turned many A Level students into dull paraphrasers of over-worked materials' (p. 19). This was followed in 1989 by the first major textbook for teachers on how to teach literature at A Level, by Brown and Gifford (1989). Also inspired by the picture that had recently emerged of the state of literature teaching, this book provides systematic guidance on teaching the course in a student-centred mode, emphasising the importance of allowing opportunities for wider reading and writing, and warning that alternative syllabuses did not necessarily mean improved pedagogy.

Alternatives to alternatives

Although Dixon's report heralded a period of sustained debate about and development in relation to the A Level English Literature course, it is significant that there was considerable disagreement amongst teachers about what an improved A Level English Literature should be like. Against a background of conflict in higher education about literary theory and the constitution of the discipline, a vocal section of the teaching community felt that the alternative syllabus movement and the pedagogy associated with it represented only a kind of tinkering with the traditional framework of the subject, and that more radical reform was necessary, appealing explicitly to literary theory for new models. Brown and Gifford (1989), for instance, concluded their guide to teaching the current A Level syllabuses by pointing out that 'we seem to have come full circle, with a group of teachers demanding the reform of Alternative A Levels' (p. 174) and suggesting that, in the future, the question 'what other ways are there of designing syllabuses so that some of the fundamental questions about literature can be placed in the centre?' (p.176) would need to be asked.

Such a model was already widely in use in media studies. Although A Level Media Studies was not introduced until 1988, the subject had grown rapidly in colleges of further and higher education, and in the 11-16 English curriculum, and Dixon (1979)

had commented on the failure of A Level English to include aspects of it. The media studies model threw the debate about literature teaching into relief by demonstrating a different paradigm for textual study, underpinned by the principles of cultural theory, and thus requiring a study of language, texts and society through a semiotic and sociological inquiry into textual production and representation, rather than through the discriminating critical practice promoted by Leavisite literary criticism. This paradigm potentially embodied the resolution of the conflicts between response and knowledge, creativity and criticism, reading and textual study which had been apparent in many liberal critiques of A Level Literature.

However, such an approach was controversial. In an early instance of the long-standing tension between English and media studies,[19] the publication of Len Masterman's *Teaching about Television* (1980) provoked a fierce debate in *English in Education* between the strongly Leavisite Roger Knight (1982) and Masterman himself (1982). In a further salvo - in a subsequent edition of *English in Education* especially devoted to the debate about literature teaching - Beynon et al (1983) argue for the wider adoption in English of 'critical literacy' practices such as those described by Masterman, suggesting that English should be concerned with understanding how certain patterns of discrimination are actually generated in society.

The influence of literary theory

Such exchanges were set against the background of the increasingly public divisions within university English departments about the nature of literary studies, which were highlighted by the Colin McCabe affair in Cambridge in 1981. The progressive secondary English establishment, uncomfortable with a Leavisite approach to literature teaching (as championed by Knight, and still widespread, especially at A Level), increasingly enlisted the voices of literary theorists in the higher sector to its cause. McCabe himself gave the opening lecture at the NATE conference in 1983 (Gifford, 1983), and the first article in the first edition of the ILEA English Centre's influential *English Magazine* was an interview with Raymond Williams (Worpole, 1979) in which he reflected on current tensions between a Leavisite conception of literary study and literary theoretical conceptions. The following year, the magazine featured an article which focused on the views of four well-known teachers in higher education –

[19] See Bazalgette (2004) for the one of the most recent.

including Terry Eagleton – about the teaching of literature in schools, asking them to reflect on what contemporary critical debates had to offer (English and Media Centre, 1980). All four critics explicitly condemn the model of literary teaching at A Level, three of them appealing to new historicism or cultural studies for alternative models.

Eagleton, who perhaps did more than anyone to make literary theory accessible in his influential book *Literary Theory* (1983) was to become secondary English teaching's foremost link with literary theory in academia, contributing a number of articles and key-note speeches over the following ten years. His article, 'The End of Criticism' (Eagleton, 1982) was the opener in a special edition of *English in Education* devoted to the theme of social class and English teaching. The editorial to this volume, by the NATE Working Party on English Teaching and Social Class, (NATE, 1982) argues that NATE had lately neglected the role of English teachers as 'disseminators of cultural values and attitudes associated with the most urgent social and political conflicts' (p. 1). In the teaching of literature, it continues, teachers 'conveniently [avoid] a class conflict view of the world' by equating the 'individual experience' with 'the human condition,' thereby omitting 'concrete social realities, such as class, by glossing over what members of various social groupings have objectively in common' (p. 2). Rejecting liberal humanist approaches to literary criticism and arguing instead for a more 'political literary criticism,' Eagleton, in his article, appeals to the Graeco-Roman notion of 'rhetoric' as a model of a powerful 'politico-discursive education' which addresses issues of language and power (p. 52). In 'The Subject of Literature,' (Eagleton, 1985),[20] he returns to this critique of liberal humanist literary criticism, arguing that the 'sensitive, receptive, imaginative' subjectivity which is cultivated through literature is also 'radically depoliticised' (p. 5).

David Light (1983), meanwhile, writes on similar ideological lines, but places his critique of liberal humanist criticism in the specific historical context of Leavis and the tradition of 'Scrutiny,' urging 'the recognition of 'literature' as a specific social and historical practice of writing' in order to 'rescue it from the wilderness to which aestheticism and idealism have confined it' (p. 73). Taking the recent writing of Peter Abbs on the teaching of literature in schools as his example, he demonstrates how its

[20] originally delivered as a lecture at the NATE Conference in 1985

aesthetic approach 'cherishes the inviolacy of personal response' (p. 70) at the expense of a conceptual consideration of literature and society.[21]

There was considerable dissent from views such as those expressed by Eagleton and Light. Abbs (1983) responded to Light's critique of his work by condemning the 'chilling' implication that ' literature must … serve politics and be a good tool for socialist change,' suggesting that 'wherever such a concept has been applied, the consequences for the human heart and imagination have been devastating' (p. 66). Another key publication in the theory debate, *Re-Reading English* (Widdowson, 1982) also provoked an attack on the politicised nature of Marxist criticism in the pages of *English in Education* (Barry, 1983). *The Use of English* – the trenchantly Leavisite journal of the English Association – meanwhile devoted many of its pages at this time to a dismissal of literary theoretical approaches from its secondary school territory.[22]

Literary theory and teachers

Such disagreements amongst teachers in higher education would undoubtedly have been reflected in their secondary counterparts. However, there was still a widespread ignorance amongst secondary English teachers about literary theory, and few – if any – reports of literature teaching informed by them. Whilst *English in Education* and *The English Magazine* occasionally published diatribes by Eagleton et al., there was little evidence in the other articles in those magazines of a general engagement with the theoretical issues raised by them. Hollingworth (1983) complains (p. 3) that:

> There is a crisis in the teaching of English Literature, and a strange aspect of this crisis is that it hardly yet causes a murmur in the secondary schools of England. Tertiary levels of education are riven by structuralist and post-structuralist debate… Literature courses in the schools go on much as usual, with arguments largely restricted to the choice of set books and the liberty of the school to govern its examination syllabuses.

[21] Abbs (1982) had argued for English as a 'literary-expressive discipline' and for 'the reconstitution of English as art,' appealing to the early 20th century 'Progressive Movement' in English teaching – concerned with self-expression and inspired by Montessori and Froebel amongst others – to temper the literary analytical emphasis of the later Cambridge School which had become dominant. However, Light comments that Abbs uses 'the vocabulary education has inherited from Romanticism' in which what is missing is 'the recognition of culture as a material social process.'

[22] See, for instance, Gibbs (1984), Holbrook (1984). Hollingworth (1983), Knight (1984).

Adams, in his introduction to Peter Griffith's *Literary Theory and English Teaching* (1987) - the first book on literary theory for secondary English teachers – characterises Eagleton's 1985 NATE lecture as 'one of the few occasions in recent years when a distinguished figure in the world of university English teaching has engaged in a dialogue with a representative group of classroom teachers of English' and points to the widening 'gap between what is taught in classrooms and what is taught in many English faculties in higher education' (p. xii).[23]

A number of other articles in the years following the theory debates of 1981-83 also undertook an explanatory mission for English teachers. Tallack et al (1986) for instance, gave an account of a workshop led by them (the University of Nottingham Critical Theory Group) at the NATE conference in 1985, in which they sought 'to bring theory into direct relationship with practice' (p. 13). Of the teachers on the course, they comment that they were surprised to find that 'a number were very widely read in theoretical texts and were already exploring how they could be used in the 17+ age range, while the majority were fully aware of the impact of literary theory in higher education and recognised that … it would eventually affect sixth-form teaching in more than a local fashion' (p. 14). However, no comment is made on how representative this group of teachers might be of the profession as a whole.

Radical proposals

Following these early influences, from the mid-1980s, the voices of a number of secondary teachers began to be heard to question, at a fundamental level, the conceptual and theoretical framework of A Level English Literature. One of the first teachers to express discontent with the alternative syllabuses, and put forward a radical proposal for change, was Goddard (1985):

> We wanted to see how far we could push an alternative A Level beyond a narrow, closeted literary heritage model into contact with the discourses and cultural concerns of the real world, so that we would be drawing upon, and in some cases explicitly investigating, a range of material … as well as mainstream literary texts… What we attempted was to include in each unit a literary text which would, we hoped, provide

[23] An issue to be explored more fully in the next chapter. Despite its title, Griffith's book does little to reduce this gap: whilst it is a useful 'potted' explication of literary theory, it makes little attempt to relate theory to either the philosophy or methodology of secondary English teaching, even in the chapter entitled 'Literary theory in classroom practice.'

> the discernible link to text that is a requirement of the board's scheme, but to have at the centre of the unit a particular discursive practice or area of social and cultural experience rather than the text itself (p. 17).

Goddard goes on to explain that he and his colleagues felt that they had failed in this aim because the necessity to prepare students adequately for the exams which counted for two-thirds of their final grade was too much of a constraint:

> We had to get through those books, and do them thoroughly, and although we never abandoned an active, independent learning stance in favour of impatient, authoritarian, transmission techniques, we had to give our students some practice in this particular game (p. 18).

Additionally, he explains that to 'unilaterally … invent a course that had no official sanction, to insert our agenda for cultural action, as it were, into a space that didn't exist' was doomed to fail, and that 'it cannot be done alone … before argument and pressure have been applied at the level of the examination boards to establish the necessity for this kind of course' (p. 19). Goddard concludes that such a move does not appear to be forthcoming, and that, 'in an irresponsible determination to preserve a narrow literary base, our academicist skirts drawn about us primly to prevent the real world getting at our literary values, we have conceded so much vital ground to the new vocationalism within which we will find scant concern for developing informed scepticism, critical consciousness and a determination to question and where necessary to resist…' (p. 22).

The following year, Peim (1986) gave an account of an alternative English Literature syllabus at his sixth form college. The English department there had developed a course based essentially on literary theory (p. 11):

> The broad aims of the project are to activate and develop awareness of the operations of ideology in literature and the media, to establish, that is, 'culturally' conscious ways of reading texts and understanding textuality; to explore cultural mythologies and their production; and while doing so to attempt to go some way towards deconstructing the power relations within the classroom. This is an attempt to evolve, at A Level, a teaching of 'literature' which deals frankly with matters of ideology and ideological conflicts, which examines ideas, feelings, ways of seeing by which men and women experience and construct their social lives – and attempts to do this from a point of view constructed in the light of certain developments in cultural and literary theory.

Peim describes a course with a great deal of discussion-based learning and many active approaches, including a wide variety of extra-textual, inter-textual and intra-textual

activities - approaches which '[emphasise] textual ideology and [create] the conditions in which students actively produce meanings and interpretations.' He suggests that 'it is quite possible… to introduce and discuss with A Level students, for example, the idea of the reader as producer, or the death of the author: in fact, students warm readily to notions of democratising reading which grant them an equality of voice' (p. 13). Elsewhere in the article, Peim illustrates the wide range of material covered in the course: a large number of literary texts, including literature in translation, popular fiction, children's fiction and folk tales, as well as Shakespeare and the 'Classics'; and a sizeable selection of non-literary and media texts, too. He concludes (p. 16) that:

> The real goal of a truly radical 'deconstructive' approach to English A Level might well be to dissolve the subject altogether and to transform the vacant space with a redefined set of practices addressed to a reconstituted group of people. There is certainly a strong need to dismantle the barriers which keep post-16 education an arena for the socially undesirable separation of the 'academic' from the 'vocational'; and which keep English falsely distinct from history, sociology and media studies. At present, though, it is possible to work towards occupying English with freshly defined purposes and practices.[24]

Others offered proposals for the radical restructuring of English in the sixth form along similar lines. The most comprehensive work to address the question was that of Patrick Scott in his survey of the recent development of A Level English, *Reconstructing A Level English* (Scott, 1989). Beginning with a critique of the A Level English Literature exam, Scott, through an analysis of examination questions and examiners' comments on candidates' responses to them, argues, like Dixon, Daw and Millard, that a reductive and often inconsistent critical model is being offered to A Level students which is reinforced by exam questions, and which 'reinforces all the weaknesses that are identified in the examiners' reports' (p. 24).

He goes on to explore the challenge to A Level English Literature which had been posed by the new English Language and Communication Studies syllabuses. Arguing, like Dixon, for a broad, inclusive conception of the subject English at A Level, akin to

[24] Peim's model of literature teaching here had been accommodated within the framework of the existing A Level course. He later expanded his critique of English teaching, and his vision of alternative approaches, in his book *Critical Theory and the English Teacher* (Peim, 1993) - the second book on the subject, and more successful than the first (Griffith 1987) in relating abstract theoretical concepts to the practice of English teaching – in which he calls for a 'redefinition' of the subject English emerging from awareness of theory as 'a necessary self-consciousness of purposes and practices opening up social, cultural and political dimensions of language and textuality' (p. 216).

that predominant at GCSE, he points out, however, that the arrival of the new subjects, as well as the proliferation of alternative Literature syllabuses, has 'led …to a further fragmentation of the 'English' curriculum,' and that, 'ironically, the outcome of a decade of experimentation has been a confirmation of the ascendancy of English Literature' (p 11). He suggests that, whilst both the new subjects provide useful stimuli for re-examining the conception of English Literature at A Level, neither constitutes a coherent means of bringing together the fragmenting elements of the subject, and concludes that:

> By and large, it has always been the case that where A Level [English] has been reformed it has been in order to allow a more sophisticated pedagogy. The institution itself with its 'disciplinary boundaries' has remained intact. While the progress that has been made in allowing teachers to shift the emphasis from what is taught to what is learnt is substantial and important, it may not be enough. If 'English' in all its forms is to survive into the next century as a significant force within the curriculum, it may have to be reconstructed in quite radically different ways (p.108).

Thus also rejecting the alternative syllabuses as a way forward, Scott, under the heading 'Alternatives to Alternatives,' (p. 105), discusses a number of models for such a reconstruction which bring together elements of language, literature, media and communication, and even history, on a cultural studies model. Finally, he sets out a proposal constructed by a group of English advisers, including himself, at a NAAE Conference in 1988, for a modular course in which compulsory modules entitled 'Publishing,' 'Story-Telling' and 'Conversations' are followed by extension modules chosen from within each of four categories: 'Investigating Language,' 'Writing and Writers', 'Reading and Readers' and 'Production.' (p. 130-135). This proposal is particularly interesting because it brings together a broad-based, language-focused (rather than literature-centred) model of English (such as that proposed by LATE in 1984) with a theoretical approach to textuality.

Avon NATE's A Level working party also offered a concrete proposal for a new English A Level (Bennison & Spicer, 1988) constituted along similar theoretical lines to Peim's alternative syllabus, though perhaps less explicitly political. The authors argue that traditional literature syllabuses are inadequate as 'to insist that students see literature as the central and superior form of cultural production is simply to delude them and to stifle the interaction between their study of literature, their own cultural formation, and their understanding of contemporary society' (p. 30). They also point to

the way in which both language and literature syllabuses 'deal inadequately with crucial questions concerning the social and cultural context' of literature and language use in society. Their proposed syllabus sees 'the whole area of cultural production and reception as a single unified field' (p. 31). An introductory module designed to bring together the study of a wide range of texts (the example given is 'Autobiography and the Construction of Subjectivity') is followed by a range of optional modules in five areas: 'Literary Studies', 'Media Studies', 'Language Studies', 'Theatre Studies' and 'Areas of Other Study.' Whichever module is taken, the focus of study is the five 'core concepts' of the syllabus – 'Form', 'Representation', 'Production', 'Reproduction' and 'Reception'. Here, for the first time, we see a syllabus model for literature which uses the language and theoretical framework of Media Studies.

The challenge to liberal humanism

These proposals offered models of literature teaching which contrasted strongly with those championed by Daw and the alternative syllabus movement, challenging what Eagleton called the 'left-Leavisite' position of the teacher who, as Griffith (1987, p.1) put it, 'on the one hand clings to a largely conservative belief in the beneficial effects of reading good books and, on the other, sustains a broadly progressive faith in the interconnectedness of individual personal development and beneficial social change.' Thus, the debate about literary theory highlighted the internal tensions in the English teaching profession – not only the tension between traditionalists and progressives, but also that between the liberal humanist position of mainstream English teaching and the more radical, usually structural materialist, positions of critical theorists.

An important incident here was an exchange which took place at this time between Peim and Elaine Millard of the NATE Post-16 committee. Millard implies, in her opening article in *English A Level in Practice*, (Millard, 1988) that the book was inspired not only by a reaction against the phenomenon of the poor traditionalist literature teaching exemplified by the HMI survey of 1986, but also by a reaction against the radical tendencies of the theorists, such as Peim, whose 'alternative syllabus' she explicitly criticises, commenting that it 'appears to condition the students' responses as much if not even more rigidly than more traditional approaches', warning against 'the flight into an unfamiliar terminology and the rapid transmission of new criticisms,' and arguing that such a 'politicised' approach might seem 'alienatingly academic for the full

range of students' (p. 8). Her reactions once again evoke the tension between the encouragement of response and the transmission of knowledge.

Millard's comments, however, led to a trenchant riposte from Peim (1990) in *English in Education*, which hit at the heart of the English teaching establishment by attacking NATE itself. Echoing both the claim of the NATE Working Party on English Teaching and Social Class a few years earlier, (NATE 1982), and Eagleton's critique of liberal humanist approaches to English (1982, 1985), Peim suggests that 'discussion of theory and politics has 'in important ways been effectively excluded from NATE, subjected to a fairly strict discursive censorship,' and that 'NATE's preferred version of English remains thoroughly liberal and stands for values that are culturally and theoretically highly questionable and politically conservative' (p. 20). The editorial in the same volume, (Bennison & Noble, 1990), although adopting a more moderate tone, similarly questions the apparent congruence between the views of the liberal English teaching establishment on the one hand and, on the other, the essentially conservative education policy enshrined in the new National Curriculum, suggesting that certain political elements of NATE's early work – a tradition of critical literacy 'represented within NATE nationally by the Working Party on Social Class and English Teaching' - had been 'gradually marginalized' (p. 4).

Peim's main target in his attack on NATE and, in particular, on Elaine Millard, is the dominance of the concept of personal response in 'liberal orthodoxy,' which he identifies with 'the ideology of individualism,' complaining of its 'Thatcherite resonances.' Quoting Millard's accusations that his own approach to sixth form literature teaching leaves little room for ' students' own writing' and involves 'a large proportion of transmitted knowledge,' he suggests that there is a confusion, in 'the liberal version of English,' about the contrast between personal response and transmitted knowledge (p. 27):

> 'Transmitted knowledge' is clearly not an acceptable element in the liberal version of English being propounded and is set against something which is valorized as 'students' own writings'. If 'transmitted knowledge is bad, though, what kind of knowledge is acceptable? How does it come into being? How does this untransmitted knowledge move about? How does it escape the institutional contexts in which it is formulated? Who controls it? … What impersonal processes are involved in the production of what appear to be 'personal' responses?

As well as arguing in this way that the 'idea of unconstrained 'personal response' is … 'phenomenologically untenable,' he points to the hidden cultural values which underlie the concept when he writes that 'it must be conceded that certain kinds of personal response are not counted as legitimate in English.' Peim, furthermore, sets his critique of personal response in the context of the orthodox approach to the teaching of literature, condemning the continued privileging of the 'questionable' category of 'literature' in English, and especially of the claims made for the 'specialness' of literary language (p. 24).[25] These approaches to personal response and literature are, he argues, symptomatic of liberal humanism's 'blindness to its own theoretical assumptions.'

Peim had not been the first voice in the profession to appeal to literary theory as part of a critique of personal response in secondary literature teaching. West (1987), in his study of the uses of fiction in the teaching of reading in three comprehensive schools, comments on the superficial way in which the ideas of reader response theorists, such as Iser, had been taken up by English teachers as theoretical justification for the personal response model, whilst other theoretical ideas had been 'passed over,' leading to 'a revised version of the same educational narrative' in which 'the details… have been filled out, but the underlying exclusions and assumptions remain the same' (p. 20). West, like Peim, argues that structuralism and discourse theory are more satisfactory theoretical models on which to base an 'alternative view' of the subject, concluding that 'for all its thoughtful emphasis on response and creativity, the discourse in the study schools retained, because of its underlying theoretical assumptions, a view of art as object in which magical transformative powers were attributed to certain kinds of texts, and a view of readers and readings that was essentially normative' (p. 22).

Peim's attack on NATE marked the beginning of a period of wider debate in the secondary education journals about the theoretical basis of the literature curriculum, and in particular the issues concerning cultural production and personal response which had been raised by West and Peim. Indeed, a change in the intellectual atmosphere was signalled in the subsequent publication of NATE's Post-16 committee, *A Level English – Pressures for Change*, (NATE Post-16 Committee, 1990), which,

[25] In this regard, it is interesting to note, for instance, the recent work of Ron Carter on the relationship between literary and non-literary creativity (Carter, 2004), which has proved influential in approaches to A Level Language and Literature.

following the controversial 1988 booklet, takes a significantly different approach to the question of theory, when it comments on 'the growing interest among many teachers in new critical theory' and suggests (p. 15):

> Teachers of English need to engage in the debate which this has encouraged about the nature of literature; they need to recognise the importance of considering a text's means of production, its historical and social context, literature's place in different cultures, the effects which our gender, race and class have on the meanings we make from a text, and the insights critical theory offers us into plural readings of any text.

Theory into practice

At this time, too, ideas about the teaching of literature based on the principles of literary theory were beginning to emerge in the form of practical guidance for teachers on what to do in the classroom, and workbooks for students.[26] Perhaps the first such text, *Enjoying Texts – Using literary theory in the classroom* (Burton, 1989), incorporates accessible and brief digests of the history of English studies and literary theory with a series of articles giving detailed accounts of using literary theory in the classroom with students at all levels of the secondary school; for the Sixth Form teacher, there are chapters on theoretical approaches to *The Color Purple, Wuthering Heights* and *Persuasion*.

Even more accessible is *Re-Reading Literature – New Critical Approaches to the Study of English* (Hackman & Marshall, 1990). This is in the form of a textbook for students which, without explicitly teaching literary theories, introduces a range of related concepts with textual examples and workings – dealing with issues such as the concept and institutions of literature, the nature of criticism, the place of popular fiction, narrative voice and perspective, the self and the narrator, issues of identity, intertextuality and text transformation, reading and interpretation. Aimed at both A Level Language and Literature, it is primarily literary in focus and is perhaps unique in a secondary school literary textbook in that it subordinates the study of individual texts to the study of literary concepts, an approach to which most teachers – steeped in the culture of personal response and the integrity of the whole text – remain highly

[26] Although some of these texts were published by mainstream educational publishers, it is difficult to know the extent to which these resources and ideas found their way into sixth form classrooms, but anecdotal evidence suggests that some progressive teachers attempted to adapt the content and pedagogy of their courses with these materials as a guide.

resistant. Yet Hackman and Marshall engage students throughout the book in reflection on their own social, political, cultural, and literary practices and in active, creative exercises demanding genuine personal responses.

McEvoy (1991) attacks the centre of the literary canon by challenging the 'cultural hegemony' of Shakespeare in the secondary English curriculum, arguing that justifications for Shakespeare's greatness use 'ideological formulations which mystify actual political relations,' appealing to concepts such as 'human nature' and 'universal values' in order to 'avoid argument' (p. 72). He proposes, however, that Shakespeare should be kept on the curriculum 'as a site of conflict' (p. 75) - 'a place where dominant readings are challenged' and 'the ideological use of texts is revealed' - and offers a list of classroom strategies for teaching Shakespeare, which are focused on a study of the plays' contemporary and modern contexts (genre and rhetorical conventions, sources, critical reception, plurality of interpretations, performance environment and reproduction, socio-cultural background, etc.) as well as a study of Shakespeare as a cultural institution. Controversially, too, he criticises popular 'active' approaches to Shakespeare such as 'improvising scenes based on the events of the plays' or playing with 'passages from Shakespeare taken out of context' as reinforcing reverential attitudes to the plays instead of their textuality (p. 75).

Similar ideas can be found in Mellor's workbook on *Hamlet* for sixth form students (Mellor, 1989), which presents a unique and comprehensive programme of discussion and analysis of the play, focusing on issues of context, genre, textuality and interpretation in a way which contrasts strongly with the personal response approach of previous literature workbooks of the same kind (published by NATE, for instance). This is one of a series of resources emanating from Australia, promulgated by the English and Media Centre in London. From the same source came a theoretically-based handbook to studying literature for sixth form students (Moon, 1990) and a number of other workbooks, based on similar principles, on studying poetry and fiction designed for upper and lower secondary students, the first publications of their kind in Britain. Mellor et al (1991) write in *English in Education* about their inspiration for these kinds of teaching practices, giving an account of research, involving both a class of upper secondary students and a class of trainee English teachers, which they found to confirm their realisation that personal growth model reading practices, which they had embraced in the 1970s, 'produce readers who are unaware of the ways in which they

operate to construct meanings and who, thus, are unable to 'read' not only the terms of their own readings but those of others as well' (p. 65).

A Level Literature and the new traditionalism

The burgeoning of debate about A Level English which took place during the 1980s, and the proliferation of new teaching strategies and proposals in line with new ways of looking at the subject, were cut short by political developments at the end of the decade, and the alternative futures which had been so vividly imagined by many were not to be realised.

Despite the unwillingness of successive governments to change the A Level system, the debate about A Level English had flourished partly because of a general optimism that A Level reform would have to happen soon, with the introduction of AS Levels (which eventually happened in 1987) as a starting point. Such optimism, however, was abruptly ended by the government's unexpected rejection of the Higginson Report (DES, 1988), the first major report on Post-16 education for some years. The rejection of Higginson was a significant sign of the country's rightward turn in education policy – facilitated by the government's espousal of increased centralisation of policy (heralded by the introduction of the prescriptive National Curriculum in 1989), and its determination to be involved in the prescription of curriculum content (as in the censorship of the LINC project in 1990). Following the demise of Mrs Thatcher as prime minister in 1990, this rightward turn was confirmed by the 1991 White Paper, (DES, 1991), which eliminated the prospect of radical change both to the A Level system and to A Level English, to the disappointment of both the alternative syllabus movement and the more radical theorists. Subsequent government policy made it clear that a pattern of greater curriculum prescription along highly traditional lines was to develop, throughout the school curriculum.

The Centre for Policy Studies

That such a crackdown occurred was not entirely unexpected. The government had increasingly been influenced in its education policy by the work of the right wing Centre for Policy Studies, which had recently published a manifesto on English teaching, and in particular the teaching of English Literature, by one of its leading voices, John Marenbon (Marenbon, 1987) – a manifesto which condemned all the developments in English teaching since the 1930s, including practical criticism, the idea

of personal growth through English, and the influence of sociolinguistics. In a chapter entitled 'The literary heritage and its enemies,' Marenbon rails against a view of teaching literature which 'consists in encouraging the use of imagination and personal response,' citing the advocacy of the HMI survey (1986) for teaching 'which promotes 'direct engagement with texts whereby a student finds a voice of his or her own,' and arguing that 'theorists [sic] come to adopt this attitude by failing to realise that regard for literature is in itself a value.' (pp. 28-29)

Ironically, some of Marenbon's arguments against Leavisite and post-Leavisite approaches to literature teaching are similar to those made by literary theorists against liberal humanists, once more revealing different understandings of concepts such as knowledge and response. For instance, Marenbon agrees that 'literature is not some sort of naturally existing category of writing,' and mourns the lack of wide reading which he blames on practical criticism. There, however, the similarities end; he concludes by recommending the use of literary texts 'to illustrate the uses of English, since these texts provide examples of English used at its best,' the memorising of 'distinguished passages of prose and verse … which they can come to know intimately and which will help to form their taste,' and that teachers 'should be sceptical of originality in response to literature because it is most likely to betray a failure of understanding' (p. 36-7). Such a reductive and reactionary version of the curriculum was also offered by Lawlor (1988). Fortunately, such ideas were too extreme even for the government; but in the years to come, the influence of Marenbon and Lawlor was to be felt directly on the Literature curriculum in schools.

The new A Level syllabuses, 1993

Following the publication of the 1991 White Paper on Education, new traditionalist A Level English Literature syllabuses were introduced in 1993 which, along with other A Level subjects, conformed to a prescriptive 'Subject Core,' issued by SEAC, the Schools Examination and Assessment Council, which restricted coursework to 20%, and outlawed 'alternative syllabuses.' The English Subject Core[27] reaffirmed the traditional content of the subject, virtually unchanged from the GCE boards' 'Common Core' statement of 1983.[28] These new syllabuses remained in use until 2000.[29]

[27] as described in Bleiman (1993)
[28] as described in Greenwell (1994)

The imposition of the new syllabuses struck a considerable blow to the idea of teacher autonomy and enhanced student response which had been central to the alternative A Level syllabuses, as well as to any prospect of a progressive or radical approach to the content or framework of the subject. Three years after Hackman's optimistic 80% coursework syllabus proposal, Ogborn & Canwell (1993) were writing instead about the need to 'salvage as much as we can of the benefits of coursework' (p. 28), encouraging teachers to plan courses in order to maximise students' opportunities to learn from their minimal coursework experience. They also point out their difficulty in understanding 'why a system of examinations specifically intended as a sorting mechanism to identify those most suitable to continue into higher education must now reduce that mode of assessment which bears the most resemblance to the one by which the most prestigious academic qualification, the Ph.D, is obtained.' Meanwhile, Greenwell (1994) succinctly spelled out his view of the effect of the coursework restriction (p. 12):

1. Fewer books to be studied.
2. Wider reading to be discouraged
3. Student-teacher choice of text to be minimised
4. Curriculum development to be stifled

Continuing the debate

In the wake of this sudden hardening of the government's right wing position, and the consequent eradication of any likelihood of change at A Level, there was a strong decline in the public debate about the future of A Level. McCulloch et al. (1993) argue that 'since all the current indications are that the A Level will continue to be unchanged for the foreseeable future, we have to return to the proposition that it can be 'enhanced from within': that there is scope within the framework of the A Level syllabus as it stands for learning experiences that develop and extend self-reliance, sense of responsibility and ability to cope with the demands of work and higher education' (p. 6).

[29] with one minor revision in 1997, necessitated by structural changes to the A Level system following the Dearing 16-19 Review rather than any major change to the course content. as described in Ogborn (1997)

In the same spirit, Peter Daw, who had been one of the major proponents of the alternative syllabuses, published two studies which continued the work of improving pedagogy at A Level along these lines, despite syllabus change. In the first, Daw (1996) visited a number of schools in his local authority whose results in A Level Literature were particularly good in order to identify factors which promote success in the course. Many of these relate to careful course and lesson planning in which students' subject knowledge and confidence is boosted by a curriculum which enables them to understand connections and draw together interpretive material from a number of sources. For instance, 'a striking feature of all the survey schools' is that, in them, 'ways are found of building a sense of the relationship between texts, rather than texts being treated atomistically' (as they are in the examinations themselves) and 'all had a strong sense of the need for students to make connections and build coherence in their view of literature beyond seeing each text as a single distinct entity alone' (p.21). Means of doing this included the use of theoretical models as well as grouping texts by period and genre.

A further finding (p. 22) is the importance of 'providing students with models of high quality critical discussion and writing on a regular basis,' also the subject of his second study (Daw, 1997) in which he examines the issue of using literary criticism with A Level students in detail. Arguing strongly for the judicious use of literary criticism, Daw's article may be read as another indictment of the lack of progress which had been made in developing a critical pedagogy for the subject. Listing ten characteristics of an approach to using literary criticism with A Level students, Daw (p. 156) writes:

> This list of 10 characteristics is not new. Far from it. Many of these same points were well made, for example, by John Brown and Terry Gifford as long ago as 1988. However, the remarkable absence of such uses of criticism in A Level teaching in recent years perhaps make their reiteration necessary. The prevailing orthodoxy, in some examination groups particularly, has been to stress a certain version of reader response to the exclusion of a balanced use of literary criticism.

Daw argues for the use of criticism partly as a general means to 'sharpen skills of intellectual enquiry' (p. 152), pointing out that it will ease the transition between secondary and higher education for all students, not just those going on to read English. However, his main thrust is that 'literary criticism encourages pupils to develop a genuinely personal response, including the possibility of resistance to the text, in ways that an overuse of 'imaginative response' tasks does not' (p. 154), and he

points out the particular benefit for those who will otherwise be exposed to the 'huge disparity between the apparently atheoretical concentration on personal response at A Level and a sudden immersion in very complex critical theory on undergraduate courses.' Challenging those who claim that 'reading a few key critical texts can often lead to students becoming fixated by one particular critic's perspective which is then used in place of their own response' (p. 150), Daw questions the integrity of the concept of personal, as opposed to critical, response at A Level, suggesting that 'the danger of being seduced by one critic's views is far less than the seductive allure of the teacher's views.' 'The challenge,' he writes, ' is not to avoid the analytical, or the history of a text's reception, but to integrate such considerations with the creative and original responses we seek to develop in our students' (p. 153).

Emerging issues

At the publication of new A Level syllabuses in 1993, then, despite the powerful debate and developments in pedagogy described here, A Level English Literature had changed little. The official version, with its framework determined by the government and interpreted by the exam boards, was very much as it had been since 1951 – although the canon had been widened to include more twentieth century writers, open-book exams were more common, and examiners placed more emphasis on the personal elements of a critical response and provided greater transparency in the assessment process. It is clear, however, that there remained widespread feelings of dissatisfaction in some quarters with the restricted nature of the content and structure of the syllabus, and with its assessment methods, inspired either by a profound theoretical disagreement with the concept of literature and literary studies offered, or by frustration with the narrowness and incoherence of the syllabus, the arbitrary focus on decontextualised set texts, the inappropriateness of the examination, and the confusions surrounding the nature of the responses required.

In the classroom, it is clear that there were a number of different versions of A Level English Literature, ranging from a traditional Leavisite approach - dominated to a greater or lesser extent by the canon, the construction of 'good' readings through close textual criticism, and an unquestioned appreciation of the value and status of literature in society – to an approach inspired by literary theory in which the canon, the concept of literature and the question of literary value were set in the context of

the study of a range of media and theoretical debates, and the processes of reading and interpretation were themselves an element of study. In between, no doubt - as suggested by the evidence of the few surveys and observations that exist, and of the published teacher and student resources which must have exerted some influence - there existed a variety of compromises attempting, on the one hand to reconcile the traditional syllabus with the more student-centred and culturally relativistic content and pedagogy of the main school curriculum and, on the other, to experiment with practices inspired by literary theory which were beginning to emanate from the universities.

There is little evidence about how widespread these different approaches were. Given the constraints of the examination, however, in addition to the constraints of teacher time and training, it must be assumed that literary theory approaches were limited, even where the knowledge, curiosity or political will of teachers might have enabled such approaches to develop. Evidence also suggests that the assimilation of active, student-centred pedagogical practices into sixth form literature teaching (as recommended by so many writers on A Level Literature during the 1980s) was very inconsistent.

Underlying this range of teaching approaches and course content were considerable interlinked issues concerning attitudes to cultural value, the education and training of teachers, and the continuum of literary education in the education system. The role of literature in supporting cultural hegemony became the site of conflict not only between the government and secondary English teachers of most ideological persuasions, but also between liberal humanist English teachers and literary theorist English teachers, and between conservative Leavisite liberal humanist English teachers and progressive 'left-Leavisite' liberal humanist English teachers. Most practising English teachers had been trained, more or less implicitly, as Leavisites in an essentially liberal humanist education system which privileged literature as an elite form of culture with a moral function; many – perhaps most - understood little of the linguistic and ideological concepts which determined these conflicts, and which were of such contemporary significance in the universities.

The comprehensivisation of the state schools, the accompanying reforms of pedagogy and curriculum content in the 11-16 curriculum, and the ever more problematic divide

between academic and vocational education in the 14-19 curriculum, brought the clash between the traditional teaching of literature in the sixth form and new approaches to the teaching of English in the main school into relief, as demonstrated in the episode of the alternative syllabuses. Despite this, however, the necessary reform of the A Level syllabus did not happen, and there is only patchy evidence that reform of pedagogy took place.

Furthermore, the clash between the English Literature curriculum in the sixth form and the models steadily gaining in importance not only in university English departments but also in cultural, media, communications and linguistic studies at all levels of the curriculum remained little recognised and little understood by many teachers, and completely unacknowledged by those responsible for the formulation of the subject at A Level. The crucial relationship between universities and schools, not only in ensuring a smooth transition for beginning undergraduates, but also in the constant interchange of ideas between teachers at both levels, and in turning out graduates with a subject knowledge adequate for the task of training to become English teachers, was left inadequately attended.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW (2)

A LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE AND THE UNIVERSITY ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS

In the previous chapter, I examined debates about A Level English Literature in schools in the 1980s and 1990s, set against a background of disciplinary conflict in the universities. In this chapter, I move on to examine the literature on the relationship between English Literature A Level and university English in the same period. I focus particularly on the representation, in both secondary and tertiary English discourses, of issues of transition between the study of literature at school and at university.

University and school English – bridging the gap

As already suggested in the introductory chapter, the current nervous relationship between university English and secondary English is a product of years of tension between the two sectors, notably since the 1960s. Before that time, relations between universities and sixth forms were close, with A Level examinations set by university exam boards which were closely linked to the university departments to which they were affiliated,[30] and not, as now, relatively autonomous institutions. The traditional form of the English Literature A Level, as formulated at its inception in 1951 (and previously in its incarnation as a Higher Certificate subject), was originally seen as the ideal preparation for the study of English (almost certainly Literature) at university.[31]

However, developments in both secondary and university English from the 60s onwards were to unsettle this status quo. On the one hand, the introduction of progressive approaches to English teaching in the schools since the 1960s, and the beginnings of 'widening participation' in the form of comprehensivisation, led to increasing pressures from the mainstream of secondary education for the A Level course to reform. On the other hand, the emergence of literary theory and the

[30] See Pound (1996) for an account of the influence of universities and exam boards on the subject at A Level.

[31] See Dixon (1979) for an account of the changing perceptions of A Level from 1951 to 1979

fragmentation of English Studies at the universities led to bitter ideological divisions there,[32] and a growing distance between the two sectors.

University English and the A Level question

During this period, there is little evidence of extended debate or communication between the higher and secondary sectors in English, or within each sector, about their relationship with each other. As we have seen, radical voices in HE English – such as that of Terry Eagleton, engaged in their own battle for English in the universities – were heard by and influenced some English teachers in Sixth Forms, underpinning the campaign during the 80s for a modern 'reconstruction' of A Level English[33]. Whilst such voices appeared often too radical for the A Level establishment, another set of voices from HE, strongly opposed to literary theory, and often opposed also to the pupil-centred, canon-broadening approaches which had become popular amongst A Level English teachers, were also often heard to criticise A Level English – mainly from the pages of the traditionalist and largely public-school dominated enclave of the English Association's journal, *Use of English*.[34]

Yet, as A Level Literature experimented with broadening the canon and engaging more closely with students' personal response, and as it moved away from wide coverage of the traditional literary canon, A Level students going on to read English at university were increasingly likely to be unprepared on a number of different counts for what they were to encounter at university, finding that they could please neither the new theorists nor the traditionalists, for all of whom the A Level paradigm was too narrow, albeit perhaps in different ways – a position which still pertains today, and, indeed, which HE lecturers insist has worsened as a result of Curriculum 2000 (an issue addressed later in this chapter.)

For much of the period covered in this chapter, the warring factions in university English departments were perhaps too busy fighting for survival and/or supremacy to allow an alternative or a formal response to this problem to emerge. Despite the

[32] See Evans (1993) for an account of internal divisions within university English.
[33] Another particularly influential voice was that of Alan Sinfield, in particular his 1985 essay on Shakespeare and Education in *Political Shakespeare (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1994)*
[34] The pages of *Use of English* were, during the 80s and 90s, full of such diatribes – many complaining both about liberalising trends in the school curriculum and the growth of theory in university English – in particular those of Roger Knight, the journal's editor.

obvious similarities and conflicts of interest that existed between university English departments and sixth forms, little formal attention was paid specifically to the tensions which characterised the relationship between A Level English and the study of English in higher education, and to the actual experience of teachers and students involved in the transfer between one and the other. The significant issue of the disjunction between the subject as taught in school and as taught in university had largely been remarked on only through passing references in works about the teaching of A Level Literature, or through generalised debate about wider theoretical issues. It was not, in fact, until the advent of Curriculum 2000 and the publication of Robert Eaglestone's *Doing English* in 2000 that a significant debate took shape.

Issues of transition

There were, however, some isolated, but valuable, attempts to confront issues of transition head-on in the 80s and 90s. An early instance was an essay by Oxford University lecturer Kate Flint (1982).

Flint, writing from a cultural materialist position,[35] identifies three 'especially pernicious effects of the O and A Level systems.' First, she criticises their emphasis on 'lists of 'Important Texts' … torn from their historical context … which may or may not be centred around a specific period' with 'little attempt … to relate the texts to other writings of the same period or to texts which raise similar theoretical points' (p.28) thus producing students who 'believe that 'Literature' is composed of unrelated Great Works … and hence perceive a university course as a process of ticking off texts from a shopping list of essentials.' This, she argues, increases 'the problem of encouraging students, once at university, to realise the importance of the inter-relating areas of literary, linguistic, social and economic history to the study of written texts', a problem which is further 'exacerbated by colleagues who share Leavisite assumptions with those school-teachers who themselves were trained to believe that great literature is about conveying 'the quality of lived experience', the transmitting of 'universal feelings' which transcend historical specificity' (p.29). She goes on to criticise, second, the network of assumptions about literature which are embodied in the exam questions

[35] Interestingly in *Red Letters*, the Communist Party Literature Journal

which ultimately inform teachers' approaches to the course[36] and, third, the assessment-led, consumer-driven approach of students which results from all of the above.

So far, albeit significantly from an HE perspective, she echoes the views of several other commentators of the time writing from a secondary English perspective. She goes on, however, to make the (at this time) exceptional point that 'unless those of us involved in the further education sector work in tandem with secondary school teachers to reform the whole area of education at 16+, we will get nowhere' (p. 30). After describing her distressing experience of sitting on exam boards[37], she recommends (p. 32) that 'we must take a more serious interest in the examination system which does so much to mould our students, reconsider how much we privilege A Level results, and attempt direct intervention in the case of the boards themselves,' concluding that:

> Until this happens, we have little justification for feeling disappointed and disheartened when faced with a group of conservative, passive, unadventurous first year students, ball points and bargain blocks of file paper clutched dutifully in hand. We must help give these students the means to challenge the assumptions and attitudes of some of our colleagues before they even enter our doors.

A similar position is adopted by Peter Hollindale (1986) in the Spring 1986 edition of *Use of English,* although he goes further. In this article, Hollindale, then at the University of York, launches a broad attack on university English and its influence on and attitude to A Level English. Drawing on a series of testimonies by A Level and university teachers from the periodical *Critical Survey* in the mid-1960s, he argues that A Level syllabuses and pedagogy were then – and continued to be – narrow and stifling of creativity and a genuinely critical approach for the majority of students – in particular the great majority not going to read English at university. He castigates the universities for their adherence to the use of the A Level as 'a visa for entry to further and higher education' and points out (pp. 31-2) that, despite some recent broadening of A Level approaches:

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[36] An issue also examined in detail by Dixon and Brown (1984), Mathieson (1985) and Pound (1996)

[37] 'Over lunch the company first lamented the current screening of *The History Man* for giving a sadly distorted picture of academic life, then patted itself on the back for being the only board to resist the temptation of setting O and A Levels in Sociology' (p.31).

> The cautious conservatism of some teachers has not changed; nor has the pressure on them to secure good examination grades for their pupils; nor has their tendency to base their self-esteem and their esteem for colleagues on the examination results they obtain; nor has the demand from university departments of English for stipulated A Level grades as a condition of entry; and nor has the narrowing and impoverishing of sixth form English work which follows from the system as it still exists.

He further asks (p. 32):

> How much are universities, through the powerful downward pressures they exert, actually responsible for that impoverishment of general culture which they spend so much time lamenting?

Hollindale goes on to point to 'the lack of professional unity between school and university teachers' (p. 34) and suggests that 'English, more than any other subject, has produced from the universities a unique combination of intrusion and neglect' (pp. 34-5). He blames this on the tendency of 'English academics to act as *cultural* critics, and hence to pontificate authoritatively about education, social behaviour and popular taste in general,' pointing to the work of Leavis and to the 'notorious Black Papers' – 'characteristic of literature-based cultural criticism' – as evidence of this illiberal strand in university English (p. 36).[38]

In a devastating paragraph (p. 38), Hollindale sums up his position as follows:

> There is … a paradox in modern criticism and academic English. It claims a broad mandate for influence as a centre of cultural criticism, even though its qualification for such a task is problematic. Yet its activity in literary criticism, where expertise is clear, is excessively narrow in the repertoire of works considered worthy of discussion, in the kinds of discussion applied to them, or in the exclusive attention given to imaginative literature as if this were the only important kind of English. It is intrusive where it should be hesitant, subjecting the diversity of common life to narrow ideological definition or impertinent cultural valuing. It is elitist where it should be venturesome, contemptuously disregarding most kinds of language-life in order to expose proliferating complexities in a few. In cultural criticism it laments the disappearance of the 'common reader', reports of whose death are surely exaggerated, while in literary criticism it progressively institutionalises reading as a specialised skill which only formal qualifications can attest.

[38] He does not exonerate the 'schools of criticism allied naturally with the left', either, accusing them of 'a similar exclusiveness' and pointing out 'their similar ambivalent use of literary and cultural analysis, their generation of arcane linguistic codes, their intolerance, and their seemingly incurable remoteness from the realities of everyday living.'

Finally, he argues for a liberalisation of English at both university and A Level, allowing students to engage more creatively with a wider range of forms of the English language and a variety of media, and providing a more flexible assessment regime. Instituting such approaches at university would produce 'parallel and liberating' change in schools, 'with immediate relevance for all sixth formers taking English' (p. 40).

Hollindale's article raises a number of important issues about the relationship between A Level and university English, perhaps for the first time formally in one essay – although his views resonate clearly with ideas which had recently been emanating from such writers on secondary English as John Dixon, Douglas Barnes and Margaret Mathieson. He shifts the possibility of blame onto the universities' illiberalism, as opposed to the traditional target of the schools' liberalism;[39] he shifts the emphasis away from the issue of the unpreparedness of students for literature courses at university, and onto the inappropriateness of university literature courses for students; and he contrasts the narrowness of university English with the breadth of what he calls 'popular' English, media and culture, increasingly the basis of English teaching from 11-16.

The PGCE and University English

For schools – and in particular for initial teacher training institutions in universities – a significant issue related to Hollindale's observations about the breadth of 'popular' English is the failure of the universities to equip English students with the subject knowledge required to teach English effectively in schools – an issue recognised by the Teacher Training Agency in its National Curriculum for initial teacher training (TTA, 1998). Those who had been to university before the theory revolution (and many who had been after) had come away with little or no knowledge of theory; in practical terms, this was not necessarily problematic, since the liberal humanist school English curriculum does not require literary theory to be either taught or understood. However, increasingly, in the light of the widespread reform of mainstream school English teaching in the 1970s and 80s, and now especially in the light of the national emphasis on media education and (relatively progressive) notions of grammar and literacy, the curriculum in general required an understanding of the wider linguistic and

[39] This is a theme addressed in more detail by Pound (1996) in his study of the relationship between the English Association, the exam boards and the universities on the one hand, and A Level on the other.

cultural aspects of the subject, and a broader conception of textual study, which such graduates were equally likely not to have encountered. Recent graduates of English are more likely to have encountered these aspects of the subject, but it is by no means guaranteed that they will have. Thus, whilst the A Level Literature curriculum proved too narrow a preparation for university English Studies, university English Studies – as Hollindale suggests – in turn often proved too narrow a preparation for English teachers needing to tackle the subject at 11-18.

In an article exploring the problems encountered by PGCE students in learning to teach post-16 English, based on a case-study conducted on a sample of Open University PGCE students, Butcher (2003) observes (pp. 234-5) that 'post-16 teaching in schools is a problematic aspect of ITT', citing 'subject knowledge differences and the differing notions of what it means to teach effectively' at this level as significant factors in this problem:

> The problematic nature of defining English is fuelled by a schism between advocates of two extremes. At one end are those teacher mentors trained in and adhering to a Leavisite paradigm of cultural heritage promoted by key texts and close personal response. At the other end are those teacher mentors working within a critical, cultural studies model drawn from linguistics. At post-16, where teachers have retained some limited power in choice of text, and where pedagogy is less affected by the need to keep control, this potential for heartfelt discussion and disagreement is more exposed.

Butcher argues (p. 237) that it is vital for teacher trainees and teacher mentors to be clear and explicit about their theoretical standpoints in relation to teaching A Level English, and to engage in discussion of important questions such as 'What is the appropriate canon for post-16 pupils?' and 'What competing standpoints are battling for control of English as a post-16 school subject?' He points out that 'subject knowledge and pedagogy are inextricably linked because a student's view of what is valuable in English post-16 will influence their choice of strategies when planning teaching.' It is clear from Butcher's study that, just as there is a tendency for English departments to de-prioritise issues to do with A Level curriculum and pedagogy in relation to 11-16 issues, so there is often a difficulty in mentors engaging with their

trainees on such issues.[40] Thus, the tricky theoretical problems which underlie the move from GCSE to A Level and on from A Level to university remain unconfronted.

Specific problems, Butcher writes (p. 244), pertain to A Level English Language:

> Students were generally unable to describe effective mentor modelling of A Level English language teaching. It appears that many existing teachers encountered by students in this study have been educated predominantly in literature-based degrees, and as such do not possess the requisite subject knowledge to teach A Level English language with confidence. They are essentially operating as non-specialists… There could be an important message here for policy-makers, if A Level English Language is to continue as a growth area: where are the effective teachers to be found with both the subject knowledge and pedagogic skills?[41]

The picture that is painted by Butcher's 2003 study is remarkably similar to that which emerges from much other evidence about sixth form teaching, going at least as far back as the HMI survey of 1986 – a picture in which, at A Level, many English departments neglect questions of pedagogy, many teachers work in isolation without opportunities to form clear theoretical frameworks in which to place or develop their subject knowledge, and many PGCE courses and mentors encounter difficulties in addressing the teaching of the course with their students. Butcher does not explicitly comment on the role of undergraduate English courses in helping to bring about this

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[40] Butcher gives the example (p. 241) of one student in his case study who, after eighteen weeks in school, asked 'How do you fill two-hour lessons with a range of constructive activities to keep A Level English pupils engaged?' suggesting that she had not observed or experienced 'a well-planned and well-executed post-16 English lesson.'

[41] The relationship between English Literature and English Language in HE, traditionally a distant one, is significant in the light of the growth of A Level English Language, though treated with some scepticism by many literature specialists in HE. Martin Dodsworth, reporting on a talk by Katie Wales at an English Association conference in 1998 (Dodsworth, 1998) reports the content of her talk as follows:

> Whilst figures for students of English Literature at A Level are declining… for English Language they are increasing. It followed that students would be arriving at university knowing more about language than they did, and less about literature. Proposals were already afoot to put more emphasis in the teaching of A Level Literature on the ways in which language shapes meaning. A regeneration of the role of language in the English degree was therefore to be expected…The new power in language studies aligned itself with developments toward the interdisciplinary in literary studies, the increasing emphasis on film and video and the enlarging of the canon…In short, it was an indispensable and inherent part of literary study…

Though the tone is sceptical, he goes on to make the important point that, in fact 'English Language is a popular subject for those in the sciences and social sciences… but that it is not serving strongly to recruit for English.'

state of affairs, but it is clear that there are several relevant issues in relation to the transition between undergraduate courses and PGCE courses. First, English students emerging from university have little foundational knowledge and even less specialist knowledge of English language, even though there is a strong argument that at least foundational knowledge is now essential for all English teachers at all stages of the school curriculum. Second, neither many existing English teachers nor many recently qualified English teachers seem to be confident enough in their subject knowledge to make explicit, and discuss openly and productively, the theoretical and (perhaps consequently) pedagogical tensions which underlie the subject, and in particular the differences that exist between the way the subject is formulated at different levels of the curriculum.[42]

Perhaps one of the surprising aspects of Butcher's study is that students should, in 2002, be leaving university not only without an understanding of these theoretical tensions, but in many cases apparently not having progressed, in their understanding of the discipline, beyond the basic reader-response or 'personal growth' positions which they may have encountered at school. Goodwyn (2002), in an article entitled '*Breaking up is hard to do: English teachers and that LOVE of reading,'* reflects on thirteen years of eliciting reading histories from his PGCE students, arguing (p. 74) that many of these students developed a passion for reading at school, which sustained them through their English degrees, but which they continue to associate particularly with A Level English Literature, and often with one English teacher in particular:

> A very strong pattern … is a description of this phase as characterised by excitement, a sense of rapid intellectual growth, the discovery of authors… This 'discovery' is what leads the vast majority to take English at university… The university period is something of a blur of books and authors… They gain the broad sweep of literary history and of criticism although they have very little love of the latter…. So despite being highly skilled readers as interpreters, very few become in any self-conscious way 'critics'. They continue to enjoy reading but react against the dead hand of theory. They never seem to discover Marxism or Postmodernism with the relish with which they earlier named favourite books. The tone is of putting up with the zealotry of university lecturers and critical theory courses whose usefulness is sometimes grudgingly acknowledged… University teachers are very rarely mentioned as any kind of role model (for anything)… They recognise [theory] as a set of intellectual tools but do not seem to

[42] It is interesting in this regard that at least one PGCE course that I know of uses *The English Studies Book* (Pope, 1998), intended for English Studies undergraduates, as a primer to ensure that students have a clear picture of the scope of the subject and its theoretical framework.

> acknowledge any profound influences at the conscious level; they do not 'take ownership' of theory.

Goodwyn goes on to reflect that another factor in this relegation of university experience may be the 'insecurity of much of university academic life' in contrast with the protectedness of sixth form experience, citing students' perceptions, 'however fair or unfair,' that 'most university tutors appear … uninterested in students and … in teaching' (p. 75). An additional factor, he suggests, might be that the type of reader response theory that is likely to have underpinned their school experience of literature is not generally covered in university English courses. He concludes (p. 76):

> …The narratives reveal a circularity in which existing English teachers induct their A Level students into a form of literary engagement, part personal, part critical, that then *survives and resists* and is unchanged by the degree that those students subsequently undertake. This also helps to explain why … those student teachers who did a very different degree [from English] … *know* that they want to teach English. Their aspiration is based on their personal 'love of reading' which … they have sustained throughout their adult lives. For the majority this is complemented by their experiences in the A level period and that fondly remembered, special teacher.[43]

Jacobs, also writing from a faculty of education, explores some of these ideas further (2005) in his examination of some of the network of experiences and assumptions that student teachers might bring to the teaching of A Level Literature, and some of the ways in which initial teacher education might help them to make sense of these. He writes of the 'Sacred Space' of A Level English Literature that so many experience, between the 'routine and numbing experience' of GCSE Literature and the 'intimidating and "over-theorised" ' experience of university Literature – a space where there is 'the maximum of energy flowing between student, text and teacher', and where 'the literary experience' *and* 'growth in student personal development' are both central. But he warns that this can lead to 'the assumption that post-16 [A Level] literature teaching is somehow more 'natural' than at GCSE and university' and that 'trainees, remembering the inspiring sessions they themselves experienced, merely have to walk into the post-16 classroom armed with their favourite book from university for the magic of the

[43] Goodwyn also raises the very important issue of gender and English, pointing out (p.78) that 'the great majority of its students in higher education are female' and arguing that the reading histories reveal the identity of the English student / teacher as a female reader of fiction, rather than, say a male reader of non-fiction.

sacred space to be automatically materialised,' It is vital, he argues, for teachers to problematise the nature of the transaction that goes on in the A Level classroom, examine their own relationship with the subject, develop their subject knowledge and pedagogic practice, and increase their understanding of the theoretical and historical contexts which have created tensions within the discipline.

The experiences of Butcher, Goodwyn and Jacobs amply illustrate some of the practical effects of the kind of tensions and divisions between university English and school English indicated by Hollindale, and the ways in which they reverberate between A Level, undergraduate degree, PGCE and 11-16 English; in particular they expose a network of potential confusions between 'reading', 'literature', 'criticism' and 'English' which underlie all these accounts.

Extending the range

Following Hollindale's 1986 polemic, it was not until 1993 that the issue of the relationship between A Level and university English received another detailed treatment. *English in Education* devoted three articles to the subject, following a one-day conference in 1992, 'The Range of English,' which had been a joint venture between NATE and the English Department of London University. Peel (1993), explaining that the conference 'addressed ways in which higher education and university departments of English could be drawn into a dialogue, and the issues of common interest around which such a dialogue might take place,' and that it led to the institution of a NATE cross-phase working party, comments (p. 32):

> If I have an image of the working party, it is of a small tug, gradually nudging together two great oil tankers for the purpose of mutual refuelling. It is a slow and gradual process. But exactly thirty years after the foundation of NATE, there is hope that the gap that currently exists can be narrowed, and that eventually between 150 and 200 university departments can be drawn into the discussion. [44]

The three articles focus on the two themes adopted by the working party: 'the nature and function of student writing and response' and 'the relationship between literary theory and classroom practice,' and are linked by the idea of 'extending the range' of the subject. Perhaps the most startling of the three pieces (Reeves & Peel, 1993) describes an English Studies course at the University of Plymouth (p. 33) which

[44] The cross-phase working party published at least one newsletter (NATE Cross-Phase Working Party, 1993), but its activity did not last long.

attempts to introduce into higher education a genre-based pedagogy, familiar to secondary English teachers through the work of Britton *et al.,* in which students 'employ, in their own writing workshop activities, the techniques that are foregrounded in the reading and discussion of texts.' Students are assessed through coursework, which consists of a portfolio of writing in a range of genres – including occasional critical essays (also treated as part of a studiable genre). In an additional challenge to the conventions, the course identifies four genres – 'narrative, poetry, dramaturgy and expository' – and the article describes the development of a course in expository (basically prose non-fiction), modelled partly on American conceptions of the teaching of 'rhetoric' (reminding us, perhaps, of Eagleton's appeal to the concept of rhetoric as a model for literature teaching in 1982). The article concludes that the success of the course is largely because 'during the course design, the pedagogy has received as much attention as the critical and theoretical content' (p.40).

Stibbs (1993) covers more conventional, though still valuable, ground by arguing that many of the methods used in teaching literature in the junior forms – such as rewriting, textual reordering, gap-filling, predicting, dramatisation, etc – are theoretically sound ways of encouraging greater critical, ideological and textual awareness, which are just as relevant in higher education. Womack (1993), meanwhile, develops the previous essays' implicit criticisms of courses exclusively assessed through the critical literary essay. In an incisive analysis of the ideology behind the dominance of the essay form, he writes (pp. 42-3):

> The essay is, so to speak, the default genre for student writing. Other forms may come into play to meet special requirements, or as a result of inventiveness on the part of the tutor or student; but if no such exceptional factors apply, everyone returns, as if by a common homing instinct, to setting, writing and marking essays. What's more, the higher you go up the system, the more true this becomes: the essay has a stronger grip on the life of an undergraduate than on that of a sixth-former; and when you come to do a PhD, the course and the essay have become identical. In this way, other forms of writing in response to reading get defined as preparatory – as things we devise to help novices get into the subject, until such time as they're ready for the real thing. The apparent inevitability of this progression makes the form look natural, as if intellectual activity produced essays the way a tree produces leaves. Clearly this is not so: the essay is a culturally specific form of communication which has not always existed, and which depends for its existence now on some quite definite institutional contexts.

Womack goes on to describe the symbiotic relationship between the essay form and the examination system, identifying the tension between the essay's apparent

universality and its cultural specificity as the origin of the practical and theoretical problems raised by its dominance in the system.

Analysing the gap

The problem of the essay in A Level English Literature and its relationship with English in higher education is also tackled at this time in three articles by Mitchell (Mitchell, 1993; 1994a; 1994b). As part of a project at the University of Hull looking at the role of argument in various subject areas in sixth form and higher education, Mitchell undertook a study of teaching and learning in A Level English Literature and the first year of an undergraduate course. One article (1994a) presents a comparison between one student's work at A Level and her work as an undergraduate, exploring the conflicts experienced by the student as she attempted to come to grips with the unexpectedly different nature of the subject at university. The student herself writes, as an undergraduate, that 'in English, instead of expecting a greater understanding of certain 'principles' we have already studied, the subject has taken a shift in a different direction' (1994a, p. 36). Through analysis of her arguments in one A Level essay and one undergraduate essay, Mitchell shows the underlying confusions about the theoretical basis of the subject which the student as an undergraduate is trying (unfortunately without either adequate explicit guidance or a coherent theoretical model) to come to terms with, and the origins of those confusions in the different versions of literary study she has encountered at each level. In the second article, Mitchell looks more generally at the assumptions underlying the courses she observed, identifying a notion of 'collective subjectivity' as a central problem. She writes (1994b, p. 17):

> Collective subjectivity is a powerful paradox. English has an ethos in which the personal and subjective experience of each reader is valued; it is about individuals responding to texts, about the growth of sensibility, and about pleasure as well as discernment. Yet at the same time there are constraints on individuality and subjective interpretation: 1) texts are prescribed and implicitly valorised by their inclusion on course lists and 2) texts are thought about in certain ways and not others for the purpose of writing and examination.

It is interesting that Mitchell's argument about literary interpretation here mirrors that of Womack (above) about the paradoxical nature of the critical essay as both an expression of the individualistic and a submission to certain cultural values. Indeed, Mitchell goes on to set out a critique of the literary essay (explored initially in her

article (1993) examining one student's A Level essay on Sylvia Plath) in which she argues that the form of the essay can work against the development of genuinely critical responses because of the paradoxical emphasis on personal yet critical responses, sensitively yet authoritatively expressed, often forcing the writer to take a line which does not reflect a genuinely critical encounter with texts. Once more, the connections and conflicts between 'reading', 'criticism', 'literature' and 'English' are at the heart of this paradox.

Defining the discipline

Mitchell's 1994 study was the first to examine work done in a university English class in order to draw conclusions about the relationship between A Level and HE English. Clearly, the value of Mitchell's study lies in the close reading of one student's engagement with the theoretical issues underlying her experience, which – although university courses and the work of individual lecturers may differ enormously – may be assumed to be one manifestation of a set of common theoretical issues which underlie all English courses. Nevertheless, part of the problem in bridging the divide between sixth form and university English is the enormous diversity of courses, pedagogies and theoretical approaches in university English departments, contrasting with the relative homogeneity of the A Level. As we have seen, conflict over theoretical issues had riven university English departments since the 1970s, and approaches to English differed markedly from university to university, especially between the old and the new universities. The relative freedom of university departments to innovate gave rise to many exciting developments in English and its related disciplines such as Media and Cultural Studies, but also led to an increasing fragmentation of the subject.

In the nineties, however, whilst A Level Literature languished in post-Centre for Policy Studies doldrums, a number of HE institutions and publications began to present – to the world in general but more specifically, for the purposes of this discussion, to teachers of English in the secondary sector – an image of university English which suggested that certain reconciliations were taking place,[45] and that reconciliations with

[45] Evans (1993), at the end of his instructive guide to the daily paradoxes of the life of the university English teacher, points out (p. 219) that, whilst 'there is great variety of practice, belief and institutional structure,' and that 'English represents quite fundamental dilemmas, for the humanities, for the university and for post-industrial society,' it also 'has the capacity to achieve … reconciliations.'

A Level were being sought.[46] This situation can be attributed partly to a recent increase in pressure on universities to be accountable and on university subjects to provide a coherent collective approach to subject content and pedagogy – exerted by the government through bodies such as HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Council for England, and HEQC, the Higher Education Quality Council, (from 1992 to 1997) and the QAA, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, (from 1997 onwards).

Despite the widespread unpopularity of these institutions, with their bureaucracies and their inspection processes, their work has unquestionably forced university departments into a more formal consideration – and attempted resolution – of sometimes problematic issues of subject philosophy, pedagogy, teacher-student relationships and admissions, and made available a great deal of information about the condition of the subject. For instance, the Subject Overview Report on the findings of the HEFCE quality assessment programme of 1994-5 (HEFCE, 1995), whilst confirming the diversity of the subject, provides both an account of the nature of that diversity, and a framework for drawing together common features of it. This work was developed by HEQC in its Graduate Standards Project (1997), which finally led to QAA's publication of subject 'benchmark statements' (QAA, 2000) – intended partly as a measure for quality assurance, but also to 'provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject' whilst enabling it to allow for 'variety and flexibility in the design of programmes and encourage innovation within an agreed overall framework.'

For English, instrumental in all of these projects has been the Council for College and University English (CCUE), the professional subject association of English in higher education. Their report for the Graduate Standards Project, (CCUE, 1997) addresses some of the issues about diversity raised by the Subject Review through the results of an authoritative survey of the content of English courses, demonstrating overwhelming support within the profession for the continuation of wide diversity in the subject within a minimal common framework[47], whilst the English Benchmark Statement (QAA

[46] We have already seen that a Cross-Phase Working Party, albeit short-lived, was set up in 1993 as an indicator of this capacity in relation to A Level.
[47] An updated version of this report was published in 2003 by the English Subject Centre (ESC, 2003)

2000) is a marvel of conciliatory wording which, whilst allowing for diversity, sets down a clear rationale for the subject. It also has some significance as a means of comparison with, for instance, the National Curriculum or the constitution of the subject at A Level.

Significant developments have also taken place in the realm of curriculum and pedagogy in HE. Perhaps the most significant of these was the establishment in 2000 of the English Subject Centre. One of a network of subject centres established by the HEFCE Learning and Teaching Support Network, the English Subject Centre is administered by CCUE and the University of London, and is intended as a central focus for the development and dissemination of ideas about pedagogy, curriculum design and the condition of the subject English in higher education. Its concerns, as seen in its newsletter, website, and conferences, tell us a great deal about what English in university is like, and indicate how much progressive development is taking place; indeed the vitality and diversity of the subject, and debate about the subject, as represented by the English Subject Centre is in considerable contrast with A Level. Examples of the kind of work promoted by the centre have abounded during the last few years, as a number of publications about the pedagogy of English in universities has appeared. Avery et al. (1998), for instance, present a series of case studies demonstrating the breadth of the range of issues facing English teachers, in areas such as creative writing, computer aided learning, and developing a variety of assessment practices and teaching and learning strategies. The ESC website also contains a large number of papers on a similar range of topics, and has published an important series of reports about English, two of which directly address the transition between school and university.[48]

The roots of this movement lie well before the advent of the English Subject Centre in the DUET (Developing University English) Project, founded in 1979, whose history, philosophy and practice are represented in Colin Evans' book Developing University English Teaching (1995). Evans writes (pp.9-10), in his introduction:

[48] *Four Perspectives on Transition* (Green, 2005a) is discussed later; *English at A Level – A Guide for Lecturers in Higher Education* (Bleiman and Webster 2006) is a rare example of a document addressed to teachers in one phase dealing with issues in the other.

> Whatever it was DUET was developing, it was not University English Teaching:… the people who came and engaged with DUET were research students …, school-teachers, and English teachers from Polytechnics (as they then were)… DUET's influence is not with the ancient universities, nor with the old, nor… with the new, but with the newest…
>
> This is to do with the very nature of British institutions of Higher Education and the distinctions which, though obscured by the newly global term 'University', are still very real… DUET is concerned with teaching, as are the newest universities; whereas the other universities still see teaching as the lowest priority, still have a residual sense of the Oxbridge notion that if a student needs anything more than a library, a room and a weekly tutorial he or she was wrongly selected in the first place. Secondly, DUET is in touch with forces to which the newest universities are responsive: feminism, multiculturalism, 'literature in English' or 'other Englishes' as distinct from 'English Literature' and the old nationalist project… Critical theory which seems to have been assimilated in a place like the University of North London… is still at the stage of being an embattled enclave in the older universities.

There is considerable evidence that this situation has changed since Evans was writing in 1995. The equalising in status of the new and old universities has led the old universities to pay more attention to teaching and recruitment, and the new universities to pay more attention to research, and the English Subject Centre seems to have had some success in bringing the different sectors together. Nevertheless, there is a significant point here. The 'new' universities have been particularly influential in advancing such developments, especially since achieving their new status during the 1990s. Lecturers from these universities – such as Rob Pope at Oxford Brookes University, Ben Knights (now director of the English Subject Centre) and Rick Rylance at Anglia Polytechnic University – have been particularly active in CCUE and the English Subject Centre, and generally in promoting progressive approaches to curriculum and pedagogy which, significantly, have often arisen from work undertaken in the context of widening participation in those universities.

One of the most notable contributors to recent developments has been Rob Pope, a member of the NATE Cross-Phase Working Party of 1993. His *English Studies Book* (1998) has become a widely used course textbook on undergraduate courses throughout the country, and is even being used in at least one teacher training institution. This extremely comprehensive and well-constructed text-book – perhaps the first of its kind in Britain – provides a dynamic overview of the subject which encompasses its diversity whilst making explicit its structure and theoretical basis. The book thus has a significant additional function, as a primer and reference guide to a new version of HE English – English Studies – which clearly sets literature, for instance,

in the wider context of a range of other linguistic and cultural disciplines. However, the book is more than a curriculum guide, providing as it does, lively examples of creative and discursive activities for the classroom. Pope's reputation in this area had already been formed through his 1995 book, *Textual Intervention* (Pope, 1995) a compendium of dynamic activities for teaching literary texts involving the rewriting and restructuring of such texts – techniques which (as pointed out by Stibbs (1993)) had already been widely adopted by English teachers in secondary schools. Pope's purpose is to encourage a range of 'critical-creative' alternatives to the critical essay, which develop understandings of theory, creativity and interpretation through an active engagement with genre and textuality.

Bridging the gap 1: doing English

While theoretical conflict continues within and between university English departments – though less so than previously – and it is clear that there is considerable diversity of pedagogy and curriculum within the profession, a picture has begun to emerge, then, from these various projects and publications, of significant trends in university English departments, many of which have implications for the relationship between schools and universities. Having, in many cases, integrated literary theoretical approaches into their work, departments are increasingly paying attention to progressive ideas about pedagogy, technology, creativity, language and literacy, and so on, many of which chime with approaches and teaching methods in 11-16 education. A book such as the *English Studies Book* also demonstrates a concern to present a coherent picture of English Studies to the world and to guide students through the theoretical complexity of the discipline – an excellent position from which to build bridges between school and university English. Whilst the gap between A Level and HE English remains wide, the position towards which A Level must move, and from which HE must move, has perhaps become clearer.

As this situation solidified towards the end of the 1990s, it was strongly confirmed by the publication of a significant statement about the relationship between university English and A Level English – Robert Eaglestone's book *Doing English* (2000),[49] in which he offers a critique of the tensions that exist between A Level English and English at university in the form of 'a guide for literature students' (the book's subtitle).

[49] Eaglestone is a lecturer at Royal Holloway College, University of London.

Eaglestone's critique is based on theoretical arguments familiar from the literature teaching debate of the previous decade; perhaps its chief significance is that it is the first major text since Scott's *Reconstructing A Level English* (1989) to reopen that debate exclusively in relation to A Level, and perhaps the first to be written on that topic by a teacher of English (rather than Education) in higher education. The fact that the book is written for students is also significant: its primary purpose is thus to help students, rather than change the A Level course. It is also a very different kind of book from Pope's *English Studies Book*, which, is a general course text book: Eaglestone's book is dedicated specifically to bridging the gap, to explicitly explaining the differences and relationships between university and school approaches to literature. It is also very much – despite its extensive use of subheadings – in the form of an extended critical essay, intended for private reading, rather than in the form of a text book for classroom work. Perhaps the student in Sally Mitchell's study (1994a) would have benefited from such an approach: I certainly would. As Eaglestone writes (p.2):

> Although teachers of English at all levels in education have had long and torturous debates about all these questions, these discussions and their results have rarely been explained to you, the person who is actually studying English, even though they affect your assessments, essays and projects and even how and what you read. *Doing English* aims to explain these ideas and show how they affect you. It is for anyone who asks: 'When I'm doing English, what exactly am I doing?'

Eaglestone's sentiments here briefly echo Graff's work on the American 'Culture Wars' (Graff, 1992) – a frequent reference in many essays about the nature of the English Studies at this time – in which he recommends dealing with theoretical issues of literary and cultural value by 'teaching the conflicts.' Whilst such approaches may be common in the introductory literary theory seminars of American undergraduate English courses, Eaglestone's formal and explicit foundational explication of theoretical tensions here is a significant and original approach.

There is a strong secondary appeal, of course, to those *responsible* for A Level English in *Doing English*; and, somewhat sceptically, perhaps, one imagines that it may have been read more by teachers than by the students it is intended for, especially given its at times controversial tone. But, whilst Eaglestone's account of the significance of literary theory and its conflict with Leavisite conceptions of literature is a valuable and well-constructed attempt to explain theoretical concepts in language which is accessible to a beginning undergraduate or A Level student, it perhaps also has some limitations for

an audience of secondary students and teachers. Whilst it is an important contribution to debate on issues of transition, it also demonstrates something of the nature of the division between schools and universities by omitting to consider some of the issues from the secondary perspective. For instance, while it argues strongly and convincingly for theory, it is at times dismissive of the culture of literature teaching in schools, and does not seek to make reconciliations between the way students might experience literature at university and the acculturative and transformative power of literature which many students will have experienced in school and throughout their lives. Similarly, whilst dealing effectively with the history of the university and A Level discipline of Literature, Eaglestone says little about the separate development of the school subject – with its emphases, for instance, on language development, creative writing and literacy – and the way literature has been central to this. Thus his accusations against A Level Literature (all quite justifiable) are not always balanced by accounts of the problematic relationship between the two sectors which take into account or explain the wider contexts of secondary education. Nor does his account go beyond the position that it is A Level that is at fault, in order to explore possible ways of 'bridging the gap', or indeed to explore the possible failings of university English departments and courses, as well as A Level, in relation to matters of transition – although, to be fair, this is clearly beyond the stated purpose and audience of the book.

Hopkins (2001) presents the same topic in the form of a text book for classroom work – based on the author's own undergraduate seminars – which delineates a creative, challenging, and sophisticated – yet accessible – course on literature and textuality.[50] (It is interesting to compare this, for instance, on the one hand, with the shallow triteness of the A Level textbook described earlier, and, on the other, with the dense inaccessibility of many introductory readers on literary theory). The provision of a wide range of illustrative texts and guidance on class activity demonstrates the author's recognition of the need for students to come to terms with issues gradually through discussion and textual exploration: as he says (p. 3), 'I have tried to provide ways of proceeding from the skills and knowledge which first-year students already have towards an understanding of the need for and possibilities of theoretical and conceptual thinking about English.' Hopkins deals with the need to work from where

[50] Chris Hopkins' work was developed as a lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University.

students actually are in terms of their knowledge and skills – as we can see in his introduction, in which he explains (pp. 1-2) how he developed an approach to teaching first year undergraduates as a response to the gap between A Level and university:

> It was felt that students doing English should have some space provided not just to 'do' English but also to think about what doing English might mean, and indeed what English was. This is not a task that English or English Literature degrees have always felt to be necessary. On the contrary, generations of English students have spent their three years reading literature without necessarily being asked to think about what exactly they were doing, or what (or if) literature was…. A Level teaching of English did not (and has not) incorporated theory as a necessary part of English. This is not necessarily a bad thing – A Level students may well need to concentrate on learning to read and interpret texts, since this is a skill which, up to a certain level, is taken for granted by university courses … In one way, students coming to study English courses are very skilled at reading texts, but in other ways they are not necessarily equipped to read the variety and rapid sequence of texts with which degree courses present them… Moreover, A Level syllabuses tend to be about the interpretation of particular texts rather than about how we read texts in general. There is usually little explicit exploration of method or theory or the contexts of interpretation.

Despite Hopkins' sensitive attempts to 'bridge the gap,' the density and difficulty of this text book certainly clarifies the enormity of the leap – both conceptually and in terms of the practical nature of the subject - that students must make from A Level to university English, by demonstrating concretely the kind of reading, thought, and classroom activity that a first year undergraduate is likely to be engaged in.

In a later study of sixth formers' perceptions of degree-level English (Smith & Hopkins, 2005), Hopkins returns to this theme, concluding (p. 315) that:

> It is not necessarily a worthy goal entirely to remove a sense of transition from school to degree-level experience… There [is] an appetite for learning to study the subject in new ways. However, effective design of first-year courses could make the experience of transition more positive, not so much by abolishing any sense of it as 'new' but by making explicit the nature of its novelty. Traditionally it has been assumed that students will simply adjust and pick up how they need to study as they go along. This seems potentially wasteful of time and energy for students and tutors, and may not be well-founded: even students taking a module specifically designed to help transition into a new kind of English study experienced some challenges. The main implication of this close-t0-practice research is that the transition module can be refined further. In particular, its present strategy of making discussion of differences from A Level English a part of its curriculum could be expanded, so that students are involved in practical and theoretical debates about how and why university English is so different in its organisation and ambitions from their previous experience.

A very different approach is taken by a group of lecturers at Anglia Polytechnic University in a number of publications[51] stemming from the Speak-Write Project established there in 1997 in order to raise standards of spoken and written English amongst undergraduates, as a direct response to issues of widening participation. The text-books, now widely used in universities, form the core of a compulsory first-year English Studies course at Anglia designed to address study skills. Whilst the focus of this course is the use of written and spoken language, it is increasingly common for English departments, in particular in the new universities, to offer similar study skills courses in the first year, often with an emphasis on reading and interpretation rather than, or as well as, communication and language; such courses demonstrate a clear recognition on the part of the universities of the need to offer greater support to students in their transition from A Level.[52]

Bridging the gap 2: focusing on transition

Both Eaglestone's and Hopkins' books seek to make explicit the underlying theoretical frameworks of the subject, whilst the Speak-Write Project is concerned rather with use of language and communication; all are written by university English lecturers who have clearly thought hard about issues of transition. But all these books are aimed primarily at first-year university students, seeking to ease their induction into university English, rather than to engage directly with issues of transition and the practical aspects of relationships between school and university English courses, departments and teachers.

Indeed, there is surprisingly little literature available on these topics. Although the influence of the universities in the formulation of A Level specifications for Curriculum 2000 was considerable, and will be discussed in the next section, little of substance was written about broader issues concerning transition in English for several years after the NATE transition working group articles of 1993 and Mitchell's 1994 study of students' writing in English. Smith (2002a) is perhaps the first to return to a discussion of such

[51] (Stott & Avery, 2000; Stott et al., 2000a; Stott & Chapman, 2001; Stott et al., 2000b)

[52] In a number of cases, departments are deliberately moving from teaching literary theory in the first year to teaching foundational disciplinary study skills. For instance, the English department at Oxford Brookes University replaced its long-standing literary theory course in 2004 with a new disciplinary study skills course entitled 'Passages.' Smith (2002) comments (p. 92) that 'this is the best way to tackle study skills – through a specific discipline,' pointing to the failure of the Key Skills programme in Curriculum 2000 to support his view.

issues following Curriculum 2000, and also perhaps the first to propose an *overview* of the issue of transition in English – rather than a theoretical position or a close reading of one aspect.

Smith,[53] arguing that, in a period of widening participation in higher education, most students who drop out do so early in the course, presents a broad case study of transition between school and university English. Suggesting that many of the problems encountered by students in their first year can be overcome by universities, he writes (p.93):

> I want to emphasise two underlying points. The first is that these problems have not suddenly appeared alongside the growing number of students entering higher education. They have increased, but they were always present – it is just that they were largely ignored.[54] The second is that it is still frequently taken for granted that students will get (muddle?) through, and that universities need not concern themselves with such mundane matters as helping with time or financial management.

He discusses the problems students encounter in dealing with lectures and seminars, pointing out the assumptions often made by lecturers about what students are able to do or feel confident about doing in terms of note-taking and asking questions. He also suggests that, whilst 'departments are most effective in offering detailed feedback and help' on written assignments, in fact 'a less addressed problem concerns course content,' referring inevitably to the theoretical divide between A Level and HE English, and quoting a student at Manchester University (Edwards, 1997):

> A predominantly practical criticism approach at A Level really did not prepare me for grappling with the many difficult and obscure theories through which texts are now being approached. Suddenly my eyes were opened to theories that politicised the very language that constituted the written work... theory is both terrifying and fascinating. Much of the time studying it is spent beating your head against a desk, and progress is slow.

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[53] Writing, significantly, from the vantage point of a large FE college which teaches both A Level and degree courses in English.

[54] Green (2007) makes a similar point when he examines evidence about HE lecturers' pedagogical practices, suggesting that widespread lack of change in lecturers' approaches to pedagogy could mean a number of things, including either that 'the quality of students entering higher education English has in fact not changed as significantly as recent media coverage and departmental views suggest' or that ' a large number of lecturers continue to teach in their old ways in spite of the shifting needs of students.' (p. 129-30)

Commenting that, with regard to theory, 'A Level is changing to take account of universities' (a rather generous reference to Curriculum 2000, to be discussed in the next chapter), Smith also asks 'are universities changing to take account of developments at A Level?' In response to this question, he points to the failure of university English departments to take account of the increased attention to language at A Level, especially in A Level English Language and Literature (again to be discussed in the next chapter,) noting that 'a trawl through university prospectuses reveals that nearly two-thirds of degree courses are still almost entirely literature-based, and that, of the others, many contain only a small element of linguistic study.'

Smith's comments about students' difficulties with lectures and seminars are echoed in numerous general accounts of university experience. With regard to English specifically, however, Wisker et al. (2001), in a multi-disciplinary study of student learning in the early stages of the first year, comment, on findings obtained through questionnaires, that a 'possibly surprising' number of students take a 'surface/accumulation approach' to learning in English at this stage, as opposed to a 'deep or meaning-oriented learning approach'. The authors also acquired data through focus group interviews and comment (p. 194) on the differences in English students' reactions to different seminars:

> In seminars that enable students to articulate their views, they feel they gain confidence and try out and modify opinions based on texts. Some seminars in criticism are so high-powered that students are silenced and some other learning experiences silence them anyway, overpower them so that they feel they have nothing to say. Since learning is about engaging students in articulating those ideas engaged with the material, it is pointless that they should just sit in silent awe before such authority and if this is the case plainly we need to look again at how we teach these modules and sessions.

Ballinger (2002) adopts an alternative approach to transition, reporting on her observations, as an English lecturer at Keele University, of A Level English Literature classes. She writes (p. 100), reflecting on her own experience teaching an Introduction to Literary Criticism course to first year undergraduates, of the range of problems they experience:

> The feeling of being disorientated and disorganised was common, as was concern that the introductory course contained too much material, leaving insufficient time for consideration of each text in detail. Also, students often felt bewildered by literary theory and were unsure about how to use criticism saliently in their assessed essays. Other requirements that caused them concern included the ability

> to analyse literary texts, to contribute to debate in relatively informal seminar/tutorial settings, to establish their own study timetable and meet assignment deadlines. I…felt that the need to understand students' experiences at this crucial time would be well served by observing some teaching of the… A Level course at local schools.

This alarmingly all-encompassing list might perhaps suggest, to a less stout-hearted person, the need for fundamental reform of either A Level or university English, or both, but Ballinger remains sanguine throughout, concluding that 'our visits to the two schools were heartening in that there are clearly many similarities of approach to teaching A Level and first-year degree' (p.107).

Ballinger observed three lessons altogether in two schools, so this was a very small-scale study. Her pragmatic reading of what she saw in the classroom is perhaps most interesting for the way it reveals an almost anthropological lack of familiarity with the nature of A Level curriculum and pedagogy, and associated problematic questions to do with constituency, cultural and literary value, the nature of critical response, and so on. A central theme of her comments is the familiar and fundamental difficulty that A Level students may read only eight texts in two years through an emphasis on close-reading, whilst at university they are likely to be expected to read at least one a week, if not more. She methodically weighs up the evidence she has seen in relation to its implications for preparing students for first year study at university, but, whilst she makes highly pertinent and practical suggestions about how university lecturers might act on this, in terms of helping students with time management, text coverage, discussion, and so on, she does not question the basic disciplinary assumptions underlying either the A Level or the university course, or look for more profound problems in the cognitive processes involved. Nevertheless, if the majority of HE lecturers are as unfamiliar with what happens at A Level as she clearly was before her observations, this must surely be an extremely useful account of transition for university lecturers purely on the level of pedagogy. She concludes her account with the strong message that 'to ensure there is more continuity in the transition from A Level to the degree, a greater discourse and collaboration between teachers and lecturers may be crucial' (p.107).[55]

[55] This is a vital point, surprisingly infrequently made. A major factor here is that, unlike many, if not most, other subjects, the professional associations for English are somewhat divergent. In particular, there are considerable historical, philosophical and political divisions between NATE, the secondary association, and the English Association, the higher association, which has made such collaboration difficult (in

In his response to Smith's and Ballinger's articles,[56] Marland (2003) deepens the debate on transition by identifying a series of underlying problems. Picking up Smith's comments on note-taking and study skills, he asks why we are failing, at all levels of the education system, to teach effectively 'advanced reading skills,' in particular through and in non-narrative texts – skills which would have a strong impact on a range of activities, from note-taking and reading for meaning to the effective use of textbooks and (in English) the assimilation of literary criticism and, potentially, theory. Whilst his comments here are intended to apply to a range of humanities subjects, he is explicit as to the particular relationship this issue has with English, pointing to the obsession of English teaching at all levels with narrative texts, and implying that a greater attention to language-oriented, rather than literature-oriented, teaching would be sensible. This line of argument also reminds us that, although the writing of essays is central to students' experience of English at school, they are rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to study the essay as a form for reading – highlighting the unquestioned but problematic naturalisation of the essay form in education which had been earlier explored by Womack (1993).[57]

Referring to accounts, in the same journal, of impressive access/transition arrangements along such lines in higher education in Australia and South Africa (Boughey, 2003; Clerehan, 2003), Marland suggests that 'though the situation of UK students is not precisely analogous', there is much to be learnt from Boughey's 'analysis of the needs of black students allowed post-apartheid to have access to higher education'; in particular, he cites Boughey's notion of 'epistemological access' to the curriculum as crucial (p. 204). Similarly, he commends Clerehan's account of a

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contrast with the Geography Association or the Historical Association, for instance, which represent both the secondary and the higher sectors.) In recent years, a Common English Forum has, however, been set up. Marland (2003) comments that Ballinger's article 'implicitly asserts how little such collaboration has been attempted, and how much more exploration is needed' (p. 210).

[56] This series of articles ran from 2002 until 2006 in the new journal *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, connected with the teaching and learning-focused Humanities and Arts higher education Network (HAN), based at the Open University.

[57] As we have seen, the National Literacy Strategy has had some impact here, as have some progressive and interesting initiatives in grammar teaching at GCSE by QCA(1998; QCA, 1999b; c), but, as Marland suggests (p.207), we may be 'way behind in teaching older school students [these] reading and study skills.'

programme called 'Understanding University Learning' which, as she says (Clerehan, p. 74), 'deconstructs some of the issues that typically mystify, including the construction and departmentalisation of knowledge, the nature of university teachers and teaching, and so on.' Whilst Boughey's and Clerehan's accounts relate specifically to situations where access in relation to ethnic cultural heritage and social class is a major issue, Marland suggests (p.204) that too often 'inverse snobbism' and 'inverted racism…leads well-meaning…professionals in both school and university to … fail to give [students] the specifically focused explanations that clarify and enrich understanding'; like Smith, Marland seems to suggest that the lessons of widening participation might be more widely applicable.

Following Marland's contribution, Smith continued the strand in *AHHE* with a more detailed examination of transitional issues in English (Smith, 2004), based on a questionnaire survey of 182 first-year students at 'five rather different higher education institutions' which explored how well-prepared students felt 'for three main aspects of studying English as a discipline at higher education level: the teaching methods used, the amount of reading required, and the writing of essays' (p. 82). The results of the survey suggest again (p. 91) that 'it is the lecture which is the most difficult teaching method to adjust to' and that 'the abrupt change from limited, intensive reading pre-higher education to wide-ranging, extensive, contextualised reading in higher education' is highly problematic. Whilst students on the whole appeared to feel more comfortable with seminar discussion and essay writing, there was plenty of evidence of problems here too.

In contrast with Ballinger, Smith displays a clear understanding of the experiences of teachers and students at both levels, and thus he offers a detailed and balanced discussion of the issues in each of the three areas of his survey, suggesting practical ways in which both schools and universities might work to overcome these problems, but also outlining political issues and pedagogical tensions which might stand in their way. For instance, on the question of lectures and seminars, he makes useful suggestions about ways in which A Level teachers could introduce elements of lecturing into their teaching, addressing issues of note-taking along the way – and he explores possible steps university departments could take to 'phase in' or structure the lecturing experience for students; he also argues (p. 87) that 'it has become increasingly difficult to justify the lecture as the principal teaching method,' reinforcing,

as it does, 'the image of the learner as passive recipient,' and suggests that its survival has much to do with factors of economy and expediency.

On the question of reading and contextualisation, Smith applauds the broadening of context offered by A Level English after Curriculum 2000, but worries about the continuing emphasis (p. 89) on 'the intensive study of a small number of set texts,' and condemns assessment-led government policies which narrow rather than broaden teachers' approaches. Interestingly, on the question of essay writing, Smith maintains – crucially, I think, and contrary to much anecdotal evidence – that it is not essay *writing* which is the primary problem: rather, it is 'the thought processes occurring (or not occurring) before the essay writing begins' and ' students' understanding of what they are supposed to be aiming for' (p. 91).

In conclusion, Smith writes (p. 92):

> Despite the fact that, for more than 10 years, politicians of both major UK parties have continually rushed through bright ideas, reinvigorating A Levels one month, higher education the next, we are hardly any nearer to a coherent overview of the relationship between the two sectors. We are told now that the government is considering abandoning the intensive study of A Levels altogether and introducing something resembling the International Baccalaureate. This has potential: but only if the impact *on both sides of the divide* is thought through carefully.

The discussion of issues of transition in *AHHE* concludes with two further contributions, Smith and Hopkins (2005) and Atherton (2006). Smith and Hopkins, university English lecturers, re-iterate, from a series of interviews with, again, sixth-form students, undergraduates, teachers and lecturers, that students face significant challenges in independent reading and learning following their experiences at A Level, emphasising the unrealistic expectations which A Level students have of the amount of teaching they will receive (they expect far too much), and of the amount of reading they will have to do (they expect far too little). Atherton, meanwhile, reflects on the very different beliefs and practices of A Level and HE teachers of English which lead to the disjunction which students experience at transition, locating a key problem in the different kinds of subject knowledge and philosophy which are dominant at each level – an argument which brings us back to the work of Goodwyn and Butcher with PGCE students. Referring to the experience of new A level specifications in 2000, Atherton writes (p. 70):

> In addition to the many insecurities many teachers feel about the teaching of English at A Level, there has also been a distinct seam of resistance to the kinds of knowledge that the new specifications demand. The source of this resistance is not lack of confidence, but lack of consent: a reluctance to espouse the model of literary knowledge that the new subject criteria represent.. In understanding this resistance, we can also start to understand some of the tensions and conceptual problems that beginning undergraduates have to negotiate as they learn to 'think in the discipline',

Finally, Green (2005a; 2005b; 2007), another lecturer in Education, takes a different perspective on the same problem, emphasising the differing pedagogies of A Level and HE teachers in *Four Perspectives on Transition*, his report for the English Subject Centre based on a questionnaire survey of the experiences of sixth-form students, undergraduates, teachers and lecturers. Whilst he once more shows that issues of independent study and reading are problematic in transition, and suggests that A Level Literature should do more to commence the process of transition in these regards, he also examines aspects of pedagogy which might exacerbate this situation, concluding that the range of teaching and learning strategies in use in HE is far narrower than that in use in schools and sixth forms, and stressing that 'students, if they are to succeed in higher English study, must be met where they arrive in terms of subject knowledge and subject skills, and these must be tailored and built upon to ensure successful retention and student development.' (2005b, p. 26). In contrast with Atherton's emphasis on A Level teachers' resistance to an academic model of literary knowledge, he stresses lecturers' resistance to the reality of students' learning needs:

> It is apparent that many lecturers believe students no longer bring to higher education the skills and aptitudes requisite for success. Students fail, in other words, to meet the subjective expectations of their teachers, which are to a certain extent a reflection of the objective pedagogic authority they represent. Conversely it is clear from undergraduate and sixth form student data that lecturers' expectations of what is required in university study tend to remain tacit and therefore opaque. (2007, p. 131)

Emerging issues

A number of themes emerge from these various perspectives on transition, ranging from Flint's 1982 reflection on the complacency of universities and examination boards to the extended exploration by Smith, Marland et al in *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* between 2002 and 2006.

Some writers, such as Marland and Mitchell, focus on the need to confront issues of widening participation and cultural value and diversity by more explicitly enabling access to higher educational discourses. They see a tendency towards mystification in English, manifest, for instance, in the way in which certain types of reading – for instance, literary narratives – are privileged above others – for instance, critical non-narrative writing, which might provide more effective access to the discourses of literary study. Mitchell, with her notion of 'collective subjectivity' and Womack, in his analysis of the role of the essay in English, emphasise the specialist knowledge enshrined in disciplinary forms, and the tensions which exist between personal and critical response, indicating the need for students to be adequately inducted into the critical modes of the discipline. Some – such as Eaglestone and Butcher – argue for the need for processes of reading at A Level to be demystified through the espousal of more critical approaches informed by literary theory, whilst others, such as Hollindale, in a parallel move, argue for demystification through less exclusive, more creative and more flexible approaches to language and culture in literary study. Pope's work shows how critical and creative approaches, and literary and linguistic approaches, might combine to make the curriculum more accessible, whilst Hopkins and Green emphasise the need for university lecturers to start from where students are and to find ways of developing their conceptual understanding through careful pedagogy.

Flint, Hollindale, Smith and others stress the need for university and school teachers to work more closely together. Hollindale emphasises the damage done by the way in which both A Level and university teachers focus on A Level grades rather than dialogue about the nature of the subject. Throughout, there are calls for university English to broaden its approach in order to effect reconciliations with school English, and for A Level Literature to broaden its approach in order to effect reconciliations with university English. In this scenario, A Level Literature thus seems neither to enshrine the creative and culturally responsive aspect of school English nor the critical and theoretically explicit aspect of university English, creating a significant hiatus between the secondary and tertiary sectors where there should in fact be the opportunity for significant reconciliation.

Underlying all these arguments, perhaps, is a sense of the problematic nature of the status quo in terms of eliciting student response to literature which is *both* authentic - genuinely 'personal response' – *and* critical – informed by an understanding of the

nature of the discipline. In order for such a situation to emerge, many of these writers suggest, issues of the relationship between literature on the one hand, and culture and language more generally on the other, need to be more openly addressed.

CHAPTER 4: LITERATURE REVIEW (3)

CURRICULUM 2000 AND 14-19 REFORM – NEW ALTERNATIVES FOR ENGLISH A LEVEL

In the previous two chapters, I explored debates about A Level English Literature, and the relationship between A Level and university English, in the 1980s and 1990s. In this chapter, I describe the way in which developments in A Level English as a result of the Curriculum 2000 initiative have brought university and school English into closer contact than for many years, and examine recent accounts of this process, and debates about it, in particular focusing on the controversy about approaches to 'context and interpretation' in the new A Level Literature specifications, and the possibilities offered by the Advanced Extension Award in English. I conclude by examining current debates about 14-19 education reform and their implications for English.

Curriculum 2000

Shortly after the publication of Robert Eaglestone's book, *Doing English* - which essentially argued that A Level English Literature had become an anachronism in relation to the modern discipline as constituted in HE - the much-anticipated new A Level syllabuses (or 'specifications' as they became known) of the Curriculum 2000 initiative were introduced. Curriculum 2000, which included a revised National Curriculum in schools and a reform of A Levels, was intended to broaden and modernise the curriculum in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. At A Level, the reform was intended to go some way towards addressing issues (which had been shelved by the Conservative White Paper of 1991) about the narrowness of the qualification by, for instance, increasing the number of subjects taken by students in the first year of the course. It was also intended to improve the flexibility and accessibility of the system – at a time of widening participation – by introducing a new modular structure to A Level, and dividing the course into two distinct parts – AS and A2.

The new modular structure had several substantial implications. Previously, A Level courses had, essentially, been examined wholly at the end of the two-year course, leaving teachers free to organise their delivery of the course in whatever way they felt appropriate. The specified assessment objectives applied to the course as a whole and could be developed organically throughout the course. In a modular system, however,

this approach was not considered feasible. There were to be six modules, each worth 15-20% of the final grade. In most subjects, there were to be five assessment objectives, each to be worth approximately 20% of the final grade. It was not considered possible to assess all assessment objectives in each module; it would clearly be difficult to apportion marks on this basis. Each module would thus be weighted towards particular assessment objectives, whilst only the sixth and final module would be assessed 'synoptically' across all objectives, in order to assess the ability of students to 'join up' the various knowledge they had gathered in the first five modules.[58]

This model of learning had some potential advantages. It increased the focus on individual learning objectives and would force teachers to address them in a more deliberate and explicit manner. It also emphasised 'synoptic' learning as an end-product of the A Level – a move that could, for instance, help to improve the transition between A Level and HE. The distinction between AS and A2 level was also used to emphasise the need for greater challenge in the second year of the course, another factor relevant to the transition between A Level and HE. In the light of the government's decisions, QCA constructed 'subject criteria' for each subject which were to guide the exam boards in their writing of specifications for each subject.

Bridging the gap 3 – literature in context

In English Literature, the more explicit focus on separate assessment objectives might help to address some of the concerns - raised by so many over the years - about the lack of theoretical and conceptual awareness displayed by many A Level students. Accordingly, QCA's subject criteria for English Literature gave an increased emphasis to 'the different ways in which texts are interpreted by different readers' and 'the significance of cultural and historical influences on texts,' as well as 'the connections and comparisons between texts' (QCA, 1999a).[59] Whilst these objectives were not

[58] Details of the A Level changes as part of the Curriculum 2000 initiative are to be found in QCA (1999d) and on the DfES and LSDA websites at www.dfes.gov.uk/qualifications and www.lsda.org.uk/curriculum2000.

[59] The assessment objectives were determined as follows (QCA 1999):

> **AO1** communicate clearly the knowledge, understanding and insight appropriate to literary study, using appropriate terminology and accurate and coherent written expression

entirely new - they had appeared in various forms in previous sets of A Level assessment criteria - the difference in Curriculum 2000 was to be that coverage of these objectives would be insisted upon through discrete attention to them in specific parts of the syllabus, whereas in the past they had been allowed to be subsumed in the more general criteria as a result of impressionistic approaches to marking which tended to emphasise close reading and personal response. In emphasising context and interpretation in this way, these objectives certainly appeared to be an attempt to counter the narrowness of previous approaches, in particular a potential over-reliance on uninformed 'personal' response.

This heightened emphasis on context and interpretation in literary study was partly a response to higher education[60]. The new government's serious attitude to issues of widening participation, combined with a new interest in liaison with schools on the part of recently founded HE subject centres, meant that the transition between A Level and university became a widespread consideration in Curriculum 2000 developments. In the run-up to Curriculum 2000, for instance, CCUE, in addition to fulfilling its primary role of representing the profession in communications and consultations with the government and other higher education bodies, extended its remit to include greater collaboration with the secondary English sector. CCUE reports (Rylance, 2002; Simons, 2000) show that the council consulted the secondary English team at QCA during the compilation of the QAA English Benchmark

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AO2 (i) respond with knowledge and understanding to literary texts of different types and periods (**ii)** respond with knowledge and understanding to literary texts of different types and periods, exploring and commenting on relationships and comparisons between literary texts

AO3 show detailed understanding of the ways in which writers' choices of form, structure and language shape meanings

AO4 articulate independent opinions and judgements, informed by different interpretations of literary texts by other readers

AO5 (i) show understanding of the contexts in which literary texts are written and understood (**ii)** evaluate the significance of cultural, historical and other contextual influences on literary texts and study

[60] Janet White, English Subject Officer at QCA, makes this clear in an article in CCUE News (White, 2000) in which she writes that 'English has always been a much-contested area, and the consultation renewed some of these debates – for example, over whether or how far A Level work in literature should seek to incorporate recent development in criticism…'

Statement, and that reciprocally, QCA not only sought the advice of CCUE about Curriculum 2000, but also, unprecedentedly, collaborated with them in the publication of a collection of literary essays – *Literature in Context* (Rylance & Simons, 2001) – aimed at teachers of the new A Level syllabuses.[61]

The book contains a series of essays by HE lecturers on the teaching of common A Level set texts, modelling and illustrating a number of cultural and historical approaches to each text, deriving largely from new historicism and cultural materialism (though not explicitly so). Janet White writes (p. viii), in her foreword, that 'this book… models a process of reading which is fundamental to the new specifications in A and AS English Literature' and Rylance and Simons contribute an introductory chapter exploring the implications of the study of context in literary study. The book is certainly a useful source of ideas (and critical essays to use with students) for A Level teachers wishing to emphasise contexts in their teaching.

Debating the new specifications

Literature in Context was the result of what Rylance and Simons describe (p. ix), in their preface, as 'a rare moment of partnership between bodies, and sectors of the education system, whose work should more often interconnect,' and was undoubtedly a symbolic step in bridging the gap between the sectors which Eaglestone had drawn attention to the previous year. However, the reassuring tone of those responsible for its publication belied a network of problems surrounding the introduction of the new specifications; certainly not every transaction on the subject of the new A Levels was so harmonious.

A foretaste of these tensions is to be found in the reviews of the book. Three reviewers find that its progressive approaches to context are perhaps strangely at odds with the way it deals atomistically with highly canonical texts, reflecting the continuing emphasis in the new A Level specifications on the study of individual canonical texts in isolation from each other (despite the emphasis on comparative and synoptic

[61] *CCUE News* (CCUE 2000) also reports, at this time, on the joint establishment, in 2000, (along with NATE, the English Association and the English Subject Centre) of a Common English Forum intended to address matters relating to the future of the subject, in particular the relationship between the study of English in secondary schools and in higher education.

assessment in two of the six modules), and the continuing narrow assessment regime. Smith (2002b) comments (p. 10):

> Of course, this study of contextuality arises out of the theoretical refutation of canonicity which originates in New Historicism…That being the case, one is struck by the canonicity of the texts chosen for discussion… Of course, the editors' hands may well have been tied by the conservatism of the examining boards and the staid nature of the syllabus, but if change is to happen in school, shouldn't it be fostered or at least encouraged by the CCUE…?

Hodgson (2002), in another review, writes (p. 64):

> One has to read between the lines of *Literature in Context* to realise that [literary theory] is what it is about…. Let us hope that teachers in schools and colleges read between the lines… to create a new practice, in which a more informed cultural understanding supports the live engagement which characterises the best of pre-university English studies.

Cash (2002), meanwhile, comments on the collaboration between QCA and the CCUE, pointing out (p.169) that:

> So close is this collaboration with schools that not one of their contributors is a teacher; so close is it with schools that every one of their contributors is a fellow university lecturer; and so close is it with schools that Janet White, Professional Officer for English at QCA, has written the Foreword.

and suggests that in reality the insights contained in the book (of which he approves) will be of little use to teachers used to teaching 'character-based questions' on texts, especially when 'the revisions to the AS exams from Summer 2002 mean that no candidate will be able to spend more than 45 minutes on any one question' (p. 171).

Eaglestone himself was drawn into a heated and illuminating debate in the pages of the English Association Newsletter at this time, a debate which focused on the nature and implications of the new A Level specifications.[62] The subject criteria laid out by QCA in

[62] Whilst these issues attracted considerable attention in the newsletters of the HE associations – the English Association, CCUE and the English Subject Centre – it is notable that there was no renewal in NATE's journal, *English in Education*, of the debate about the nature of literary study at A Level which had so characterised the journal in the 1980s and early 1990s. Perhaps this is an indication of the extent to which the profession had diverted its attention to the mainstream 11-16 curriculum following both the introduction and subsequent controversial revision of the National Curriculum, and the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy. Perhaps, also, it

1999 formed the basis of the various exam boards' specifications for A Level English Literature courses beginning in 2000.[63] However, the assessment objectives were ambiguous enough to create considerably differing views about what they actually meant. In particular, as suggested by the reviews of *Literature in Context,* there was disagreement about the extent to which they implied that the study of literary theory – or even a sustained approach to literary criticism or cultural context – ought to be part of the A Level course. Exam boards took somewhat different approaches, but, on the whole, conscious that teachers were not ready for explicit literary theory, they steered a very conservative line, creating specifications that looked very similar to previous ones – apart from the admittedly challenging and wide-ranging synoptic modules.[64] Still, however, there was disagreement and considerable lack of clarity about what students would actually need to know.

Martin Dodsworth (2000), the chair of the English Association, ignoring questions about theory, and apparently interested only in whether the specifications included enough weighty literary material, initiates the debate in the newsletter by commenting (p. 4) that 'the QCA has done its work well from the point of view of the universities' in ensuring that at least three of the texts studied should be pre-twentieth century, and should cover poetry, prose and drama - but criticises the exam boards for their 'usual disinclination to involve students in the study of the past', commenting that the choice of Faulks' novel *Birdsong* as an optional set text 'is symptomatic of low expectations' and warning that 'universities should not expect too much of the new system' as 'there

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suggests a certain resignation to the centralised curriculum control which had seemed such an imposition in 1989 but which has since become commonplace.

[63] QCA's subject criteria included the assessment objectives and a set of rules for textual coverage - ensuring that at least eight texts representing a number of different types and periods would be covered - and assessment.

[64] Stevens (2002) writes enthusiastically about the possibilities of the synoptic assessment, exploring practical classroom strategies, and commenting (p. 106) that 'topic-based units in particular offer students exciting opportunities to examine works in their social, political and historical contexts and to explore relationships between the substantial number of texts they will encounter.' She also offers a convincing argument for the greater use with students of text extracts within thematic contexts to extend wider reading and confidence with a range of texts – a technique that has often been a taboo in a system focused almost exclusively on the reading of whole substantial literary texts.

are still many ways in which it can be tailored by schools to unadventurous and unrewarding texts.'[65]

Pamela Bickley (2000), a teacher both in HE and in an independent girls' school, takes a wider perspective but comes to similar conclusions. She asks, in the same newsletter (p. 5), 'to what extent is it the responsibility of schools to consider A Level as a preparation for university work?' and 'to what extent… should university departments see themselves as producing the teachers who could be educating A Level students within a year or two of completing their degrees?' She suggests that the new specifications will mean 'radical changes in post-16 teaching with inevitable consequences for the designing of degree courses and the teaching of first-year students' and argues (p. 6) that 'it is precisely because most students won't be studying [English] beyond their A Level that they must be acquainted with a challenging syllabus, certainly one which moves considerably beyond contemporary or 'accessible' literature.' She decries the emphasis on personal response which characterised A Level in the past ('The past, truly, is a foreign country – but not one, perhaps, where there was ever a golden age of A Level' p. 5) and suggests that in the new syllabuses 'there is far less possibility for indulging in the 'This poem makes me sad' school of criticism' (p. 7). However, she feels that the exam boards have interpreted the QCA criteria 'disingenuously, aware that teachers are not in a position to offer a course in critical theory… and have no desire to do so,' and indeed says that she 'cannot begin to convey the distrust and dislike of theory expressed by many established teachers,' warning that the new objectives could mean that 'a process of excruciating over-simplification will be going on in the classroom,' and going on to predict the death of English Literature owing to students' 'intellectual impoverishment' as everyone will be 'reading Media Studies' (p. 7-8).

Adrian Barlow, chief examiner at the OCR exam board, in the next newsletter (Barlow, 2000b), challenges both Dodsworth and Bickley. He argues (p. 4) that he shares Dodsworth's 'concern about the study of the past' but recognises that for most students, who will not go to university to read English, 'taking literature seriously but also for pleasure will largely mean reading contemporary writers and watching

[65] As a final aside, Dodworth writes that 'even the new requirement … to show ability to relate texts to their contexts may not amount to much given the reduced status of history in our schools.'

contemporary drama.' In his view, 'teaching students to read, criticise and contextualise new writing is… an essential part of a sixth-form English curriculum.' He writes (p. 4-5):

> The Awarding Bodies were all very aware that higher education … has had a significant impact on the drawing up of the subject criteria. Our job was to interpret these criteria in ways that would create attractive courses for our customers – who are in the first instance school and college English departments, not university faculties…. The courses that we offer must be both post-GCSE and pre-university, and that is a difficult balance to strike. The one thing that A Level should not be, however, is a mini-degree course – and that is why the issue of theory within A Level is so tendentious.

Barlow goes on to suggest that, whilst 'there are… many ways in which the insights generated by literary theory have already influenced the teaching of literature at A Level' and the new criteria will 'significantly affect the way future students are taught', 'the perspectives of English teaching at A Level and at degree level may differ.' He continues (p. 5):

> When pupils from the age of five upwards learn that writing is a creative process, it isn't surprising that most teachers focus on texts as the outcome of individual creative activity rather than as units of cultural production… For A Level students the function of contextualisation… is to help them realise, understand and enjoy more the literature they are studying.

Barlow's arguments are then challenged by Eaglestone (2001):

> Theory, or at least the ideas summed up by the term theory, forms one of the largest gaps between HE and secondary English. 'Theoretical 'ideas and questions now generally taken for granted at HE have been very slow to influence A Level. This is not to imply that A Level should simply be exclusively a training for a degree – it clearly should not – nor to suggest that A Level English students should be debating finer points of Derrida's discussions of Hegel. It is to suggest, however, that A Level is very far from matching - in appropriate way – the shape of the discipline in HE.

Arguing (p. 7) that 'the new assessment objectives do seem to have been designed to bridge this gap', Eaglestone points out that – whilst theory is often presented as 'different hats to wear' – it isn't in fact 'just an arbitrary collection of names and jargon' as it often seems to be. Rather, it is a 'catch-all term for the new questions that readers ask of literary texts that weren't asked before', part of a process of 'reading and interpretation [that] grows out of our experiences, concerns and hopes for ourselves and others':

> In some ways, to object to 'theory' per se is to object to the changing intellectual and social climate of the world and to stick one's head in the sand. And it seems to me that people doing A Levels are often the least ostrich-like and the most prone to looking around. A colleague of mine remarked that 'all seventeen year olds are natural theorists. They ask the big questions of literary texts because they really care about what they mean.'

Eaglestone discusses whether students 'should read or at least know about… 'primary theoretical' texts,' arguing that they should read – or at least read *about* – some of the key interpreters of literary texts (for instance Said and Spivak on A Passage to India), and/or some accessible introductory texts that are 'based on questions and issues' such as Pope's *English Studies Book*. He concludes (p. 7):

> Moreover, the argument that much of this material is 'beyond' A Level students is easily disproved by the intellectual content of other A Level subjects. Reading around the texts and thinking through ideas that the texts and their interpretations raise makes English a subject. English is not just 'reading literature': surely it is an informed reflection on that literature too…. English should be a reflection on literature as it forms, interacts with and mirrors the world we all share. At A Level, theory offers this and should be embraced, not kept behind the scenes.

This debate usefully displays four key approaches to the issue of A Level Literature. Dodsworth, the most anachronistic, sees canonical coverage in preparation for university studies as the chief issue. Bickley, whilst recognising the difficulty in using A Level as a preparation for university, ultimately maintains a traditional, elitist view of literary study at this level; despairing at the 'dumbing-down' she sees happening, she implies that A Level is too degraded to be able to deal with theory, since it cannot even adequately deal with canon coverage. By contrast, Barlow rejects an elitist view; whilst wishing to embrace both canon and theory to a limited extent, he argues that both are inappropriate for students at A Level if introduced in any substantial form, and ultimately embraces the primacy of an A Level course dominated by the close reading of individual texts.

Eaglestone, however, occupying a position somewhere between Barlow and Bickley/Dodsworth, suggests a way of combining both the critical and intellectual challenge valued by the elitists with the culturally sensitive approaches valued by the proponents of personal response. He argues that theory is neither too difficult nor inappropriate, but demands a different – rather than less accessible – way of looking at the nature of literature and literary study. Barlow's views are perhaps more realistic in

the short term, given the status quo, but Eaglestone's view – challenging and radical – is convincing, if only because he bypasses the argument about whether A Level should be a preparation for university, and instead imaginatively argues the inherent appropriateness and coherence of a theoretically-informed course for A Level students. Eaglestone's vision, in some ways, appears to be the heir of the more radical, Eagletonian, of the alternative syllabuses of the 1980s.

Evaluating Literature in Curriculum 2000

In the end, however – despite the urgency and vitality of these early debates – Curriculum 2000 did not bring about the radical reform of English Literature A Level that some hoped for.[66] Whilst there is no doubt that the new A Level Literature syllabus does incorporate an increased emphasis on the context and interpretation of literary texts which is a step towards its modernisation, it has hardly constituted a radical change. The introduction of any substantial approach to literary theory or criticism was, as the debate in the English Association Newsletter suggested, unrealistic under the circumstances, and the emphasis on the context and interpretation assessment objectives has proved to be minimal and inconsistently applied, whilst other problems with the assessment and modular structure have negated some of the potential for progress. There has been continuing debate in both sectors about whether the new syllabus is either an adequate preparation for university English or for an understanding of literature. Some voices, on the one hand, have decried the perceived liberalisation of the curriculum; some, on the other hand, have decried its theoreticisation; others have argued that it does not go far enough – and it is clear that these disagreements, spread, as they are, through both sectors, are microscopic versions of broader disagreements about what English is, and what it means to study English.

A number of the issues were explored in more depth in the journals in 2003 and 2004, as the experience of teaching the new syllabuses began to be evaluated. Atherton (2003) writes (pp. 97-8):

[66] Indeed, introduced hurriedly and without sufficient funding, Curriculum 2000 as a whole has barely broadened the experience of the A Level student, and the weight of its assessment requirements has proved a narrowing influence to counter any advantage gained from breath of study, as recognised by Tomlinson.

> It seems a long time since Peter Buckroyd of NEAB told us that A grade candidates would fail if schools continued to teach English literature in 'conventional' ways, and that the new specifications for English Literature would represent a radical break with the past. Back in 1999, it seemed that the new version of English was to be nothing short of revolutionary, bringing not just a set of structural changes, but also a philosophical shift in how English was to be defined and what kind of knowledge it would deem to be valid. The new emphasis on contexts, for example, was seem as offering a bridge between A Level and university, drawing on elements of critical theory and historical study and thereby adding rigour to a subject often viewed by outsiders as resting on little more than personal opinion. Yet the reality of the new specifications has been very different. Indeed, one could be forgiven for thinking that what they represent is not a new way of looking at English, but a missed opportunity to define what it is that the study of English Literature involves… In reality, the critical vision embodied by the specifications is neither radical nor demanding, appearing instead as a mishmash of philosophies that have been adopted in a half-hearted and inconsistent manner.

Atherton, an English teacher in a state secondary school, goes on to identify the system of apportioning different assessment objectives to different modules as a significant contributor to this failure (p. 101):

> This new method of dealing with 'contexts'… involves a selectiveness that undermines the new specifications' professed ideal of using elements of literary theory to bridge the gap between A Level and degree study. QCA's decision to restrict the assessment of contextual knowledge to certain papers, for example, implies that such knowledge can sometimes be dispensed with: that texts can be understood without their contexts, and that readers can produce readings that are detached from their circumstances.

She gives several vivid examples of the absurd effects of this on several modules, for instance, the teaching of the AQA Shakespeare module (p. 102):

> No credit is given for an understanding of historical and cultural contexts, or of alternative interpretations by other readers, even though a coursework unit might seem to provide an ideal opportunity for the wider reading and research that such knowledge would require. Indeed the June 2001 Examiners' Report made it quite clear that coursework topics 'which directly encourage critical reading and background reading should not be negotiated. Tasks which encourage candidates to research historical background, for example, can cause candidates to stray from [those assessment objectives] which do earn marks': namely, those relating to knowledge and understanding of 'the ways in which writers' choices of form, structure and language shape meanings,' and of 'literary texts of different types and periods,' although how such knowledge could be gained without an understanding of contextual influences is not specified. Effectively what AQA seems to want from this paper is a traditional, formalist analysis of the old triumvirate of language, theme and character, meaning that a whole range of potentially stimulating and challenging topics have been placed out of bounds. Candidates writing on King Lear, for instance, would be given no credit for work on such standard themes as Aristotelian views of tragedy or the concept of the morality play. Even though such work is not beyond the capability of many sixth-formers, AQA suggests that it should not be expected of them until a later stage.

Atherton goes on to explore the exam boards' understandable attempts to avoid 'over-emphasising' these objectives in order to counteract teachers' 'fears that the course would demand specialist knowledge and a huge amount of extra preparation', but argues that this has meant that they 'have hardly been tackled at all,' pointing out that, in fact, 'it would be entirely possible… for a student to achieve Grade A at A Level – and to begin a degree in English literature – without having read any literary criticism at all, a very different proposition to the smooth transition between school and university that was originally envisaged.' She concludes (p. 107-8) that the continuing lack of emphasis on 'specialist knowledge of literary scholarship' at A Level:

> … contributes to a belief (common amongst both students and lay observers) that English Literature is little more than an extended course in reading for pleasure, with sustained analysis being seen as intrusive or unnecessary… The fact that other disciplines escape such questioning appears to go unnoticed: students never seem to complain that they wouldn't do differential equations if they weren't part of the syllabus… To assert the academic foundations of the study of English Literature is in no way to deny that it is a subject that can bring great (if not unique) pleasure to both teachers and students. Neither is it a call to restrict the subject to an intellectual elite… Maybe the time has come for a more sustained discussion as to what form A Level English should take.

Atherton's clear-sighted analysis of the specifications and exam papers highlights the difficulty of compromise approaches to the reformation of subject philosophy, and in particular the problems caused by the exigencies of hurried reform which is qualifications-led rather than pedagogy-led and takes place without adequate consultation or professional training. It also highlights the continuing way in which assessment skews the nature of learning at A Level, however well-intentioned the curriculum might be. Furthermore, she relates her analysis of the inconsistencies of the exam to broader issues about the purpose and nature of literary study, raising fundamental questions about the distinction between reading literature, enjoyment of literature, and the study of literature, at this level.[67]

[67] Adrian Barlow, in the light of such criticisms, mounts a balanced defence of the exam boards and the new specifications in an article (Barlow, 2004b) originally presented as a paper at a Common English Forum/English Association conference in Oxford. He draws attention to the many difficulties presented to the exam boards by the QCA's subject criteria and the other strictures of the Curriculum 2000 reforms. In particular, he stresses the problems caused by the necessity to ensure comprehensive assessment of every element of the course within a complex modular structure.

One of Atherton's most interesting points – echoing Eaglestone's appeal to a comparison with other A Level subjects – is her comparison of the nature of knowledge in English Literature with Maths. She develops this comparison with other A Level subjects in another article (Atherton, 2004, pp. 32-33):

> The AQA specification for A Level History aims to enable candidates to 'understand the nature of historical evidence and the methods used by historians in analysis and evaluation'… The same board's A Level in Religious Studies aims to 'treat the subject as an academic discipline by developing knowledge and understanding appropriate to a specialist study of religion' [including] an awareness of 'the contribution of modern scholarship' to an understanding of the set topics, and of how different critical approaches… can be applied to biblical sources.' And I've been struck, over the last few years, by the depth of theoretical sophistication required by my English Language students…
>
> I'm not suggesting here that we should forget about the affective power of English literature: its capacity to move, to challenge, and to enlarge. Yet we should, perhaps, be more willing to look to other subjects for examples of how this affective function can be accommodated without any concomitant denial of the importance of academic knowledge. The AQA specification for Religious Studies, for instance, outlines very clearly the opportunities the course gives for students 'to address human experiences of transcendence, awe, wonder and mystery' and to 'explore their own beliefs, creative abilities, insights self-identity and self–worth'. Yet interestingly, this specification sees no apparent contradiction between such aims and the desire for students to take part in 'rigorous study of religion.'

Craddock (2003), a secondary Head of English, is as critical as Atherton of many features of the implementation of the new A Levels. In contrast with Atherton, however – and strikingly in contrast with the approach of the R.S. syllabus she cites – he rejects the attempt to academicise A Level (p. 119):

> Life in the end is not a science, cannot be lived like one, and is all about process not result, being not just doing. Literature reflects this and reminds us to look out for what we, and the world we live in, are really all about.[68] Education, to be meaningful and disinterested, must remain independent in part from the ethics of daily life, from narrow productivity or money, or the need to measure. People are organisms, not mechanisms –and the experience of literature, like life, is an organic thing, notwithstanding attempts to deconstruct such terms or set an agenda.

Elsewhere in the article Craddock raises a number of valid and significant concerns about the difficulty of integrating theoretical and contextual considerations into textual study at A Level in a way that students are able to assimilate, the strictures and problems of the new assessment regime, and the potential losses to students if textual

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[68] As Atherton (2004) points out, Craddock 'does not specify exactly who 'we' are.'

study ceases to offer students the opportunity to discover and explore 'great literature' which 'transcends its contexts rather than just reflecting them.' Craddock eloquently – and with some awareness of theoretical issues – makes the case for a traditional approach to English Literature at A Level, but ultimately he is surely naïve in supposing that education can be 'disinterested' and 'independent… from the ethics of daily life' and in assuming that it is not possible to reconceptualise the teaching of literature to integrate a more critical approach successfully in terms of classroom pedagogy.[69]

Barnes (2001) raises a different, though related, issue – that of the effect of the modular structure of the new Literature A Level on learning (pp. 156-7):

> Under the old system, it was perfectly possible to cover the entire content of the syllabus in the second year of the course. This meant that the first year could be spent reading around the syllabus, allowing for the needs and tastes of both teacher and students, and providing for a range of experience of different genres, which enriched their responses to the set texts when they came to settle down to them…. Although it is still possible to teach the two-year course as a linear course, it is likely that there will be pressure on schools to organise it in modules. … the course as a whole is liable to become fragmented…That might not matter in itself, if the knowledge and skills built up during the modules could be meaningfully brought together in … the synoptic assessment unit…. But can they make up for the possible loss of cohesion which the modular system may bring about?

She rightly draws attention to the irony of the need for a synoptic unit as a result of a modular syllabus which is likely to lead to fragmentation and incoherence. Her concern here was justified: the requirement to address both the modular structure and the AS/A2 structure, and the requirements to cover a range of objectives, set texts, periods and genres, meant that the specifications lacked any real logic or coherence .How much better if the entire syllabus were cohesive and therefore synoptic in its entirety!

She also refers here to the loss of the use of the first year of the course as a wider reading year and, crucially, an assessment-free year. This is not a straightforward issue. Whilst it draws attention to the potential narrowing effect of assessment on learning – and there is much evidence that, in previous syllabuses, the assessment-free first year

[69] Ford (2003), meanwhile, another Head of English, covers the same ground in the same volume, but in the form of an anti-theoretical rant (p.120): 'Our students will become intellectually impoverished if what passes for the study of English Literature these days is allowed to continue in its current form.'

of the course was very beneficial in counteracting this and broadening students' textual experience – it ignores the problematic nature of leaving all assessment until the end of the second year of the course,[70] the evidence that many centres did not use the first year in the way she describes, and the possibility that a year of relatively unstructured wide reading might be even more effectively used in a more structured way.[71]

Barnes also raises the issue – echoing Craddock – of the possible dangers of the increased emphasis on contextual knowledge in the new specifications (p. 160):

> What has been lost in the syllabuses which students are following now is the emphasis on response. Knowledge, understanding and analysis are the keywords… Students are required to make connections and perhaps be more obviously professional in their approach.

Barnes' implication here is that – whilst the new syllabuses may be aiming for more informed responses from students – there is a danger that they will mark a return to aspects of the older-style A Levels which focused on 'transmission of heritage' with the 'teacher as custodian of knowledge.'

She goes on to tackle the related issue of the use of literary criticism at A Level, raised also by Daw (1997). Whilst Atherton protests that the spirit of the new specifications should have meant that students ought to read some literary criticism in order seriously to attend to the assessment objective requiring understanding of 'interpretations of texts by other readers,' Barnes argues (p. 160) that this attitude sees the issue 'in terms of approaching the text from the outside instead of using it to see readings which arise; but there is no need for any imposition from outside, since the texts themselves raise the contexts':

> There is a move away from the old style syllabuses, where the different readings got lost in the primacy of readership response, but students are not being asked to mug up all the available criticism in order to find different readings. They are simply being asked to consider different readings and to search for evidence in the text. In this way, the AOs are providing a methodology for a subject which hasn't had one before, or at least a declared one.

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[70] She does in fact acknowledge this in a later article (Barnes, 2004)

[71] Interestingly, the reformed advanced literature syllabus in schools in Victoria, Australia (Victorian Board of Studies, 1999) lays out a structured syllabus for the first year of the course which is assessed by means of continuous teacher assessment only, and which does not count towards the final grade at the end of the second year.

In her comments, Barnes recognises the difficulties of an over-reliance on reader-response approaches, and yet seems apprehensive about exposing students to, and enabling them to critically assimilate, extra-textual information.[72]

Developing practice through Curriculum 2000

Despite the contrasting sets of problems raised by Barnes, Atherton and Craddock, and the general feeling that both QCA and the exam boards had missed an opportunity in the new specifications, there is evidence that many sixth form centres took the ideas raised and the opportunities offered by the new specifications very seriously. John Bishop, a Head of English, for instance, writes (Bishop, 2004) of how Curriculum 2000 has 'radically reshaped' his teaching, making him 'far more demanding in what he expects both [himself] and [his] students to know about context' (p. 223).

In this, teachers were helped by a number of useful publications which attempted to guide them towards innovative strategies and approaches to context and interpretation.[73] Many of these were designed to tackle the problem, commented on in several of the critiques cited, of assembling sufficient and appropriate textual resources to equip students with broad contexts for their set texts and topics. The English and Media Centre, for instance, published a series (the 'EMC Advanced Literature Series) of resource collections carefully targeted to each module, as well as one aimed at developing more general concepts about context and interpretation. Text, Reader, Critic: Introducing Contexts and Interpretations (Ogborn & Webster,

[72] By contrast, Brindley (2001) recommends the explicit teaching of literary theory at A Level, suggesting that 'even without the spur and justification of [the assessment objectives], literary theory is an important and stimulating way of developing A Level students' abilities to analyse literature more effectively' (p. 21) and that 'teaching literary theory at A Level is not about teaching the intricacies of the theories of Derrida or Saussure. It is more about modelling particular approaches in the context of selected texts, at a depth that helps students understand, but which doesn't overwhelm either them or the texts' (p. 19). These debates are also reflected in the work of Andrew Stibbs, who proposes attention to the concept of 'knowledge about literature' throughout the secondary English curriculum (1995; 1996; 1997), following the debate about the empowerment of students through developing 'knowledge about language' in the National Curriculum (LINC, 1991).

[73] These are collectively reviewed in Bleiman & Webster (2000). It is notable that recommended texts include not only those written specifically for the new A Levels, but also texts intended for first year undergraduates such as Pope's *English Studies Book*.

2000) essentially aims to introduce the concept of criticism to students, using valuable and innovative active approaches to textual interrogation in order to 'model' certain issues – the canon, the nature of interpretation, textual reception, and literary theory, for instance. Together, the activities would make an interesting and accessible introductory course, although, as there is no explicit 'home' for this kind of broad attention to general literary concepts in the A Level course, they do in fact seem rather disjointed and disembodied. Other texts in the series valuably help students to examine – again through dynamic approaches to texts as well as through infomation provision – the historical and literary contexts of texts in certain periods and genres.

A somewhat different approach is taken by another dedicated series, 'Contexts in Literature' (Cambridge University Press). Here, each volume takes a different period and genre/topic (e.g. *The Great War in British Literature* (Barlow, 2000a), *The Gothic Tradition* (Stevens, 2001)) giving an accessible account of relevant cultural and social history, and an anthology of text extracts from all the major writers associated with the area. Whilst these texts adopt a more transmissive didactic approach than the EMC texts, they do provide a wealth of source material that could be imaginatively deployed by teachers. Most interestingly, they – along with the EMC texts – constitute the first formal attempt to provide teachers and students at A Level with high quality, accessible material aimed at enabling students to learn about the broad sweep of social, historical and literary contexts which might inform their readings of a set text.[74] It is perhaps, however, also worth noting that, in doing this - revolutionary though they might seem in the context of English Literature A Level – they are only, in fact, fulfilling the role which text books have always fulfilled in almost all other A level subjects.

Back in the classroom, McEvoy (2004) describes the A Level Literature course at his college (Varndean College, Brighton – a large sixth form college), where teaching along

[74] In this way, they are markedly different from the notorious 'Coles Notes' and similar traditional 'cribs' which tend to provide highly reductive approaches to theme, character and background. Both sets of publications also provide an accessible source of extracts from literary criticism. It is worth mentioning here that developments in technology – namely the availability of literary and literary critical material over the internet – have also, at this time, made serious attention to secondary sources in A Level Literature a more manageable project - although, of course, with attendant issues to do with the selection and evaluation of such material. Even these issues could, however, be avoided through the use of dedicated subscription databases such as *Literature Online for Schools.*

contextual lines has been routine in the English department for years. He quotes (pp. 215-6) a report by Barbara Bleiman of the English and Media Centre on the department's work:

> The teachers teach every text taking what they call an 'issues' approach, always asking questions about the political and historical contexts for the writing and the way in which the texts have been read. They structure discussions around key questions and encourage students to begin to ask the questions for themselves. Even though the assessment objectives about interpretations and contexts are given different weightings in different papers, they always teach the two in an integrated way, believing that they are inseparable… Students are encouraged to think for themselves, and are generally able to make good decisions about what is relevant and useful, rather than regurgitating irrelevant contextual material…
>
> The department stresses the need for students' opinion to be well-informed, pointing out that in many of their other subjects. (Politics, Media Studies or Social Sciences), they are familiar with the idea of theoretical approaches and the need for thorough research. The teachers are less interested in developing a 'vague' personal response, which can lead to superficial criticism and are more concerned to develop A Level students' ability to put together rigorous arguments, based on discussion of contextual and critical ideas. They like to see students as being 'not far behind university students' and see English A Level as an 'ante-chamber' to university English. Having said this, they are not desperately concerned that students should know all the labels (Marxist, Feminist, and so on) but more that they should understand the underlying issues and ask important questions of the texts.

McEvoy goes on to explain how students are taught from the very beginning of the course about notions of canon and context and 'the key theoretical frameworks of contextuality, intertextuality and plurality of interpretation' using whole texts, extracts and critical essays. He comments further (p. 216):

> We know that 80% of our students do not go on to university to read English, but that is not the point. What we offer is a serious discipline which we believe opens up a critical perspective on so much that is important on our students' lives. Our colleagues in the Science department do not offer a hopelessly watered-down or out-dated version of university Science; we hope we don't either with English Literature…. We enjoy very good value-added scores; in fact in 2001 our ALIS value-added score for A Level Literature was equal highest in the country.

McEvoy's article provides evidence that, whatever the problems posed by curriculum and assessment, a determined and principled contextual approach, supported by up-to-date subject knowledge and appropriate pedagogy, can be highly successful in motivating the full range of students, whilst more than adequately 'bridging the gap' between A Level and university. It also appears to be the concrete embodiment of Eaglestone's vision of a theoretically-informed, student-centred A Level Literature

course. Most of all, it – and much of the debate surrounding Curriculum 2000 – seems to suggest that the solution to the problem of the gap between A Level and university English is at least as much to do with teacher attitudes and subject knowledge, and the legacy of certain dominant approaches to literary study associated with A Level for decades, as it is to do with the shape of the curriculum.

Accounts of this kind of progressive A Level Literature teaching have always been rare, and have become rarer in the last twenty years. However, in the light of recent debates about Currciulum 2000, a recent edition of NATE's professional journal *English Drama Media*, in which three practising teachers give accounts of their approaches to theory and practice at A Level, provided further evidence of classroom practice designed to challenge dominant modes of and attitudes to A Level literature teaching and to provide ways of engaging and challenging A Level students beyond the traditional scope of the subject. Blake (2006) and Snapper (2006a) write about ways of transcending the narrow structures of the syllabus and set texts by helping students to see such texts as part of a cultural cotinuum, a wider literary world in which set texts have (and have always had) a life outside the classroom.[75] Wright (2006), meanwhile, writes of the way in which she has explored explicitly with students how they are positioned as critics by schools, syllabuses, texts and teachers, and – through a comparison of Film Studies A Level with English Literature A Level – examines (p. 17) some of the ways English teachers can disempower students:

> Often in English, we add to a sense of the subject's mystique by keeping the sources of our expertise largely invisible to [our students] – the mysterious degree, the single copies of authroitative texts kept at home for consultation – adn this can add to a sense of disempowerment. Film Studies, on the other hand, requries that the student sees the newspaper, magazine or internet reveiw site as contingently placed, text in amongst lots of other text. They are encouraged to see hwo the critical space can swarm with voices rather thna feeling like a museum in which they must revere the hushed tones of one or two hallowed guides.

[75] These messages are echoed in a recent publication about A Level English and work-related learning (Bleiman & Leggett, 2006), in which the authors present inspiring case studies of A Level students applying literary knowledge creatively and critically to real-world scenarios such as planning a theatre production. producing a theatre programme, organising a poetry event or publishing a work of fiction.

Language and Literature in Curriculum 2000

Although Curriculum 2000 did not bring reform of a fundamental kind to the study of English Literature at A Level, then, and although the changes it brought were problematic in many respects, it did have a significant effect on the way the subject was perceived and approached in many classrooms. It also brought significant changes to sixth form English in other influential respects – notably in the reform of the A Level English Language and Literature course, and in the introduction of Advanced Extension Awards.

Until Curriculum 2000, A Level English Language and Literature had comprised half the English Language A Level and half the English Literature A Level, with no unique content at all. Whilst it is possible that some centres ran innovative courses which integrated the two subjects in an interesting way, in fact, what usually happened was that students attended half of an A Level English Literature course and half of an A Level English Language course - a convenient arrangement for students who wanted a bit of both.

Under Curriculum 2000, however, English Language and Literature became a discrete and original subject. The new subject at A Level attempted to show how the study of literature and language could be interconnected, (although, as Ogborn et al. (2000) explain (p. 8), the development of specifications was 'very revealing of the different awarding bodies' understanding of what integrated study means.') [76] Whatever the problems of integration, however, the new course had significant implications for the nature of literary study in school. For the first time, a course was available which set literature strongly in the context of ideas about textual processes, reception and production, examining literature in the light of creative writing, popular culture or linguistics, for instance. NATE Post-16 Committee (2005) write (p. 13):

> Some Language and Literature specifications are more innovative than others, but they all reflect important changes in the study of English. To varying degrees, all embody the idea that 'literature' should not be constructed as a separate domain from 'language', and that the methodology of textual analysis derives from both linguistic and literary sources.

[76] Bleiman (1999) gives an account of some of the issues relating to the integration of the subjects at A Level.

The implications for teaching and learning in this new subject are considerable. As Smith (2001) writes, for an HE audience:

> In AQA Specification B, some modules are close to what we can traditionally expect, but others, such as AS2, 'The Changing Language of Literature' … are not. Students have to compare/contrast More's *Utopia* with Huxley's *Brave New World*, from the viewpoint of changing attitudes to writing and language…. AS5, 'Talk in Language and Literature' does not examine a Shakespeare play from the traditional A Level angle of theme and characterisation, but from the angle of dialogue construction. Students analyse ordinary conversation and see to what extent Shakespeare uses or ignores its features in producing heightened dramatic dialogue.
>
> There is also more emphasis… on students producing their own texts. For 'Coursework Production of Texts', a student might write, for instance, a short story, and for Text Transformation, a thirty-minute puppet version of, say, *Twelfth Night*, to introduce young children to Shakespeare. For both modules students have to write an accompanying commentary on their texts, analysing the choices they have made and the reason for them.

These approaches echo some of the more creative approaches to literary study which have been developed recently by a number of teachers of literary linguistics such as Rob Pope at Oxford Brookes, based on active and deconstructive approaches to literature which ultimately have their roots in literary theory.[77] But the new A Level sought to bring together in an integrated way at A Level two subjects which have traditionally been formulated quite separately and on quite different theoretical frameworks. Although there are some 'literature and language' and 'literary linguistics' courses in HE, the two subjects remain very separate in most institutions, despite some recent attempts to bring the two closer. This separation, for instance, is symbolised by the existence of two different HE subject centres – the English Subject Centre and the Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies Subject Centre – which focus respectively on literature and language. For the universities, as Smith (2002) writes, the increasing variability of students' pre-university experiences of English could be a significant issue (pp. 96-7):

> Members of some university English departments, at Reading and Birmingham for instance, were fighting against this as long ago as the 1960s, and some of the newer universities have embraced the wider concept of English Studies. But a trawl through prospectuses reveals that nearly two-thirds of degree courses are still almost entirely literature-based, and that, of the others, many contain only a small element of linguistic study. Historically, linguistic and literary scholars have been separate entities, engaged in very separate endeavours. But when the first students from the new A Level Curriculum 2000 syllabus arrived at university in September 2002, some of the more competent among them would have been accustomed to

[77] See Pope (1995).

> integrating linguistic and literary approaches and vocabulary. How many of their lecturers were prepared for this?

And again in Smith (2001, p. 30):

> Specifications such as this give impetus to unresolved questions such as 'Should degree courses be primarily literature-based? 'Should the texts studied in the course be primarily from the 'canon'?… We'd need to travel a long way to produce a more integrated course. Should we be doing so? Are the skills involved in the new specifications ones which should be developed more explicitly at degree level?
>
> There's another implication too. Given that students may have studied one of the three Englishes, and that the specifications vary between exam boards, should departments run in the first term or semester, or even throughout the first year, an induction to degree level English studies?… Traditionally the transition from A Level … to university has been taken for granted: the new curriculum encourages us to be more active in making this transition successful.

Smith reminds us here of the disparity between university English (predominantly literature) and PGCE / 11-16 English (an integration of literature, language and media education) discussed earlier, and, detecting a trend towards English as a single, integrated subject in the Sixth Form, perhaps with optional specialisation in Literature or Language, suggests that perhaps it is time for the universities to change.

The trend towards making provision for English as a single, integrated subject in the Sixth Form is also reflected in another development related to Curriculum 2000 - the introduction of the Advanced Extension Award in English. Designed as an additional exam to stretch the most able in a range of subjects, this award is embodied only in the form of an exam paper: there is no syllabus, and dedicated teaching towards it is intended not to be necessary[78].

In English, the implications of the AEA are interesting, for a number of reasons. It is a single subject specification, intended to be accessible to all students, whether they have studied English Language, English Literature or English Language and Literature, and therefore illustrates, to a certain extent, the principles on which an integrated English might be based. For instance, it identifies a set of aims and a description of content which, whilst admittedly rather general, are nevertheless common to all three

[78] See Warner (2006) for a full account of teaching the AEA

manifestations of the subject.[79] It also promotes a model of the English curriculum quite different to that in the A Level specifications themselves, despite being based on the same subject criteria and objectives. Barlow (2002), the chief examiner at the awarding body, OCR, writes (p. 16):

> The Specimen Paper available to all students taking the 'live' paper in 2002 is based on 'Language, Shakespeare and Power.' The material in the reading booklet will be a mixture of literary and non-literary passages… together with related critical/theoretical and contextual material…
>
> In Section B, there is a choice of five… questions, all of which relate to the central theme… or to specific issues arising from the critical/theoretical or contextual passages. Thus, for instance, in the Specimen Paper candidates could choose to discuss about language development over time, about the idea of 'genius' in art or about the nature of drama. Section B may also offer candidates the opportunity to demonstrate skills in adaptive or recreative writing, commenting on the linguistic or literary issues that have arisen… The Section B topics cover a range of central issues: so far, in the two pilot papers and in the Specimen Paper, there have been opportunities for candidates to discuss ideas such as literary and non-literary English, the Canon, implications for translation, and the relevance of English Studies today.

In other words, the English AEA gives opportunities for just about everything that the critics of A Level English Literature have been demanding for the last thirty years – breadth and depth of scope; access to debates about politics, language, culture, power and values; recognition of the value of students' own writing; integration of literary and non-literary texts and approaches; and attention to context in the widest sense. [80]

As it is currently formulated, the Advanced Extension Award is only suitable for the most able, but this is because it is additional to the A Level and intended to be tackled without extra teaching or resources. Were it to be a part of – or even central to – the A Level itself, it could be accessible to all.[81] Indeed, assessment of the kind described by

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[79] See the *Advanced Extension Award in English Specification* (OCR, 2002). In addition, a small number of A Level English resources is being aimed at students in any of the three English subjects – a notable example is Beard (2001), an introduction to textual study which, through modelling linguistic approaches to literary texts, aims to provide a common framework for all the Englishes.

[80] Another 'extra-curricular' approach, *eMagazine* – the popular magazine for A Level English students published by the English and Media Centre – similarly promotes notably wider perspectives than the A Level specifications themselves.

[81] The AEAs are intended, in any case, to 'be accessible to all able candidates, whatever their school or college, and whichever specification they are taking, so that significantly

Barlow – which (following Atherton's comments) appears very similar to the kind of assessment taken for granted in many other A Level subjects – would open up many possibilities for the subject. So far, the exam has attracted little interest, but were it to be available to all, it would certainly address many issues in the transition to university English, as well as providing an appealing and valuable study for other students.

14-19 reform and the failure of Curriculum 2000

For A Level English Literature, Curriculum 2000 brought a mixture of consequences. It provoked a lively return to debates about the nature of the subject in the Sixth Form, and it forced many teachers throughout the country to evaluate their attitudes and pedagogy, update their subject knowledge and get to grips with certain issues in the teaching of literature which they might previously have avoided. New developments in A Level English Language and Literature and in Advanced Extension Awards also foregrounded alternative models for the literature curriculum which envisage a greater degree of integration with the language curriculum, and a broader approach to context and interpretation than in A Level English Literature. On the other hand, the hurried nature of the reforms, the constraining nature of the modular structure and assessment regime, and the narrowness of vision - as well as the understandable nervousness - of the exam boards in the interpretation of the subject criteria meant that developments were inconsistent and often incoherent, in many ways minimising the effect of the changes.

For the A Level system as a whole, Curriculum 2000 proved to be fairly disastrous. Rushed, under-resourced, and over-assessed, the introduction of the new A Levels largely failed to address most of the intended issues – the narrowness of students' learning, the inflexibility of the qualification and assessment system, and so on. As a result, a fundamental review of 14-19 education was established, led by Mike Tomlinson and a 14-19 Working Group, and, despite the government's partial rejection of Tomlinson's proposals[82], and its decision to maintain and revise A Levels

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more young people have the opportunity to take them than take existing Special Papers.' (OCR, 2002).

[82] in the White Paper, February 2005 (DFES, 2005)

from 2008, the survival of A Level as a qualification is perhaps more seriously in question than at any other time in its history.[83]

Convinced that broad structural reform of the system and a highly integrated approach to learning would be required, the 14-19 Working Group initially focused its attention on the idea of an 'English Baccalaureate,' as recommended by Hodgson & Spours (2003) and Phillips & Pound (2003). Such an approach would have been modelled on the approach of other baccalaureate systems, notably the International Baccalaureate, which had recently become popular in Britain, and, indeed, is the only existing alternative qualification system to A Levels available in England, although only taught in around 50 institutions.[84] The English Baccalaureate, however, would have been different from other baccalaureates[85] in that it would have provided an inclusive structure for vocational as well as academic qualifications.

Tomlinson (Working Group on 14-19 Reform, 2004) eventually rejected the idea of a baccalaureate, with its prescriptive attitude to subject choice and content, in favour of a more flexible diploma system, nevertheless modelled in many ways on the idea of the English Baccalaureate, in which something like A Levels would remain but with a new identity as components of a broader advanced diploma. The implications of these proposals for English were unclear.[86] Although nothing definite was proposed for the content of English, several aspects of the overall proposals, however, gave indications of possibilities.

With regard specifically to Advanced Level study, Tomlinson recommended that, in preparation for their eventual integration into the diploma, A Levels should be re-adjusted so that learning is less constrained by assessment. Barlow (2004a) writes (pp.1-2):

> Tomlinson has indicated that he would like external assessment in future to 'sample' the work that students have covered, rather than rigorously to test every

[83] Hodgson and Spours (2003) give a full account of Curriculum 2000, arguing that its failure was a necessary final step in the move towards fuller reform of the system.
[84] Pound (2006) gives a full account of the I.B., including an examination of issues of progression to university from the diploma (Snapper, 2006b).
[85] Phillips and Pound (2003) outline all the main baccalaureate systems.
[86] Bleiman & Snapper (2005) give an account of the provisional implications of the report for English at both Intermediate and Advanced Level.

> aspect of it. Teacher-based routine assessment (rather than special coursework assignments) would cover the rest. This is a complete reversal of the present policy whereby every aspect of course content must be 'policed' through the exams students sit. For this new approach to work, there would have to be some relaxing of rules about such things as assessment objective weightings, use of open and closed texts in exams or permitted proportions of internal assessment. Teachers of English may well welcome the end of some of these restrictions.

In addition, Tomlinson wished to see the number of modules reduced from six to four, and assessment objectives re-distributed in the specifications so that they are not artificially apportioned to particular modules – a response to what, as we have seen, has been a particularly difficult problem in English Literature under Curriculum 2000. Although Tomlinson's report overall was rejected, these recommendations regarding A Level assessment - in line with Tomlinson's concern to introduce 'assessment fit for purpose' and his concern to 'reduce the assessment burden' in the system - have in fact been introduced in relation to the revised A Levels to be introduced in September 2008.

These moves may help to solve of the problems of inappropriate assessment in English Literature – not only the problems associated with Curriculum 2000, but also those earlier problems which the alternative syllabuses in the 1980s tried to address, and which the Conservative White Paper of 1991 reinstated – freeing teachers to use the assessment objectives more flexibly, and allowing a greater variety of approaches to teaching and learning, as in some pre-1993 syllabuses.

New alternatives for English A Level

Although Tomlinson's proposals were rejected as a coherent whole, Tomlinson's work has in the last few years prompted debate about possible futures for English A Level. One aspect of Tomlinson's proposals for A Level which provided some cause for optimism – and which the government has decided to proceed with in the new 2008 arrangements – was his recommendation (Working Group on 14-19 Reform, 2004) that A2 components should 'incorporate AEA-type assessment, with performance reflected in the grading, to challenge the most able learners':

> A more demanding A2, that incorporates the extended challenge of the AEA, but without an added exam, would provide access to top-class achievement to all A Level candidates, but without the additional examinations burden… Measures would need to be taken to ensure that changing the standard had no adverse impact on middle and lower grade bands.

Whilst the wording here is distracting in that it implies that the content of the AEA is accessible only to the most able, it does signify a more flexible approach to subject content and assessment. For English, it is hoped that this could mean that the type of learning currently only catered for by the (intentionally untaught) Advanced Extension Awards will become a taught part of the A Level itself, and thus available to all students, not just the most able. For English Literature, this could have a transforming effect on the subject by extending synoptic learning approaches and the consideration of the wider contexts of literature and literary study so that they become central to the course, rather than marginal.[87]

There has also been some discussion of the possibility of extending further the integrated approach to English adopted by the Advanced Extension Awards. Tomlinson's proposals were predicated, to a considerable extent, and certainly to a greater degree than Curriculum 2000, on provision of breadth and flexibility as well as entitlement and progression, and this again raises the question of specialisation and integration within English. Barlow, again, writes (p. 2):

> How can the English curriculum from 14-19 (or 14-21) be more effectively integrated than it is at present? Does it make sense to have a unitary subject 'English' at GCSE and again at AEA, but to have three separate subjects in between (at AS/A Level)? In the more flexible, credit-based system proposed by Tomlinson, would it be better for English departments to be able to offer combinations of English Language and English Literature units (as in Higher Education); or is the present system, with a free-standing and quite separate subject, English Language and Literature, a better approach – for students and for English as a discipline of study?

Barlow is clearly not thinking in terms of a full integration of the two subjects, although it is interesting that, reflecting another potential of 14-19 reform, he is thinking in terms of progression from GCSE to A Level – another problematic transition – as well

[87] Indeed, new A Level English specifications published in Autumn 2007 have made considerable moves in this direction, following new A Level subject criteria published by QCA (2006) in the light of the White Paper of 2005.

as on to university. A recent report on English A Level, however, published by members of the NATE Post-16 Committee (2005), including myself, developed the idea of integration as a central theme, arguing that reform of the 14-19 system presents an ideal opportunity to re-examine the constitution of the subject in the Sixth Form, and advocating a radical reform of A Level English, with some form of integration between Language and Literature as a way forward. We proposed an entitlement curriculum for English A Level which would guarantee all students access to both literary and linguistic approaches, and an explicit and interconnected analytical framework:

> The entitlement would include the socio-cultural understanding of language that is at present available to those who follow a *Language* specification. It would include a more coherent approach to literature than is offered by the *Literature* specifications, positioning texts within cultural contexts and dealing more overtly with issues of genre, narrative, representation and so on. It would draw from the integrated *Language and Literature* specifications a coherent method of textual analysis, in which the inexplicit approach of Practical Criticism would be grounded in analysis of genre, structure, and rhetoric. It would extend critical literacy into the modes of speaking and writing, giving students opportunities to find their voice by transforming and responding to the utterances of others in various spoken and written ways. (p. 40)

In the months following Tomlinson's report and the publication of the NATE report, there was a strong sense that questions about the coherence and integration of English as a subject were being taken seriously[88]. Representatives of QCA were heard at meetings to express strong support for the idea of a single subject English at A Level, the English Association supported it – though with somewhat different inflections – in its subsequent report on the issue (Barlow, 2005), and the English Subject Centre was highly receptive to these ideas from the Higher Education perspective. Recent developments suggest that, despite the variety of positions adopted by teachers and commentators at both levels, aspects of the need for greater convergence between 11-16 English, A Level English and HE English are now recognised explicitly by official bodies at both levels.

[88] See Barnes (2006) for an account of this debate. Jacobs (2005) took the idea further, suggesting an integrated English consisting of literary studies, language studies, media studies, cultural studies and performance studies from 14 to 19.

The 2008 A Level Revisions

In the end, integration of this sort did not feature in QCA's revised subject criteria for the English A Levels, however. As we have seen, the new A Level English Literature – following consultation which included discussions with representatives of both HE and secondary English as part of QCA's English 21 project (QCA, 2005a; b) – is to incorporate a broader approach to textual study and in particular to issues of context and interpretation, making them a central part of A Level literary study, in response to the problems of Curriculum 2000, and building on the work of the AEA. Further, it has been recognised that rigid and dominating assessment arrangements need to be loosened, the development of the skills of independent study and research need to be more firmly incorporated, and explicit attention to the processes and products of criticism and creativity in literature and literary study needs to be consolidated. As such, the new A Level courses reflect continuing moves towards the model of literary study which is dominant at HE, and indeed represent the most significant change in the mode of A Level English Literature since the exam began.

There are, however, considerable worries about both the timescale for these very considerable changes – only a few months between publication and first teaching of the new specifications – and the nature of the imposition of the changes on A Level teachers. Coming as they do from above, without adequate teacher engagement and professional development, and despite the complex theoretical and pedagogical issues which we know surround the teaching of literature at this level, and without any substantial movement to increase actual contact between teachers and university lecturers, it remains to be seen how successful the changes will be.[89]

Emerging issues

The debate about Curriculum 2000 has been significant in the way it has engaged university and school teachers together in a discussion about A Level English which recognises the essential inter-relatedness of the two sectors, and concedes the need to establish explicit positions in relation to the theoretical aspects of the discipline. The discussion between Barlow and Eaglestone reveals a considerable distance between the two in terms of their views about the value of literary study for young people, and the

[89] Early reflections on the new A Level Literature course, before it begins in 2008, are to be found in Snapper (2007), Barlow (2007a), NATE Post-16 Committee (2007), and Bleiman (2008).

nature of their responses; Barlow continues to see A Level as essentially resistant to the study of literary theory, which he perceives as inaccessible, the preserve of university English, whereas Eaglestone re-envisages the subject as one in which the concerns of both sectors converge. Here, perhaps, again, we see the processes of liberal humanist mystification at work in contrast with the explicit critical positioning of literary theory. Eaglestone, Atherton and McEvoy all seek, however, to deflect the notion that such a position is inhumane, arguing that students are empowered by critical enquiry and are thus able to locate their personal responses in a wider social and cultural context.

Again, other commentators make the parallel move of emphasising creative approaches to literary study which embrace broader cultural and linguistic activity to draw out authentic response, along the lines of the new Language and Literature A Level, and in line with developments of a similar kind in some HE institutions. Further, the re-emergence of the notion of English as a single subject at A Level suggests possibilities for exploring models of teaching and learning English Literature which embrace both the critical and the creative, perhaps enabling students – and teachers – not only to theorise reading, literature and criticism, pleasure, value and response, more effectively, but also to experience them more directly as dynamic forces in the social world.

Despite some cause for optimism, and although recent developments have undoubtedly brought universities and sixth forms closer together, there are, nevertheless, many issues to be resolved if the relationship between A Level and university English is to be clarified. There are, as we have seen, considerable professional, institutional and ideological barriers to further progress in both sectors; and the relationship depends not only on strengthening communication and understanding between the two sectors, but also on the links and coherences between other sectors – between English in the National Curriculum, at GCSE and at A Level, and between university English and PGCE English, for instance – and between branches of English: literature, language and media education, for instance.

A great deal of the debate which has taken place has been on the level of critical ideology or in terms of curriculum boundaries and structures and text choices. However, we have perhaps also seen some evidence that as much might depend on

the cultures – traditions of thought and pedagogical practice – which are dominant, or vying for dominance, in each branch or sector of the subject, as on the curricula, syllabuses and directives provided for them by policy-makers; that it is assessment structures, rather than curricula or ideologies, which often determine students' and teachers' approaches; and that there is considerable variety of opinion amongst teachers in both sectors in any case regarding such fundamental issues as the purpose and nature of literary study. Given this complex of factors, it is perhaps surprising that there are few accounts of the actual dynamics of teaching and learning at this level, and the ways in which issues concerning literary response and cultural value play themselves out in the classrooms, lecture theatres and institutions where advanced literary study take place.

CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY

PROGRESSION FROM A LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE – DESIGNING AND CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In this chapter, I outline the processes and methods by which I moved from the identification of a research project in the light of the literature review to the eventual analysis and presentation of data from the project, of which there is an account in Chapter Three. In the first section, I outline the process of identifying the project and formulating research questions. In the subsequent sections, I give an account of the negotiations and interactions involved in setting up the project, and collecting and analysing the data, along with reflections on the way in which these were conducted in order to account for issues of ethics, validity and reliability.

1. Identifying the project

Origins of the project

The origin of this research project, described in the introductory chapter, lies in my experience as an English teacher, which led me to question the appropriateness of the A Level English Literature course for Sixth Form students – even after Curriculum 2000 – in ways, also described earlier, which relate to questions of cultural value, and in particular to the model of literary reading, understanding and response promoted by English Literature A Level. My concerns were about the weaknesses in the A Level's theoretical framework and in its effectiveness as a starting point for higher study of English, for training as a teacher of English, and indeed for a general understanding of literature as a function of language and culture in society. My review of the existing literature about English Literature A Level, as described in the previous chapters, enabled me to place these concerns in the context of long-running debates about the nature of the study of literature at A Level, and the relationship of A Level English with both the 11-16 English curriculum and the English curriculum at university.

Underlying many of the debates which form the major part of the literature have been concerns about the accessibility of advanced discourses in literary study to students - the nature of students' responses to literature, their understandings of the discipline,

the tensions between the relatively untheorised modes of critical response dominant at A Level and the highly theorised modes often encouraged at university, and the tensions between modes of response based on literary criticism and more flexible modes of literary response which draw in broader approaches to culture, language and creativity.

Towards a research focus

In formulating a research project for this thesis, I wanted to find a way of examining some of these tensions between different theoretical models for the study of literature, and in particular to investigate the ways in which teachers and students at advanced levels engage with the theoretical and cultural frameworks of literary study which have been emphasised by recent developments.

Though a discourse about the theoretical underpinning of the literature curriculum has informed debates about A Level English for the last thirty years, I particularly wanted to revive this discourse by relating it to the recent interest in the relationship between the literature curriculum as it is formulated at university and as it is formulated at school, at a time when the universities have begun to stimulate ideas about ways in which A Level English might change in order to reflect changes in the university discipline, and at a time when the continuum of education from 14-19 and on to university is a particular focus of attention. In recent years, following years of ideological conflict, the university English departments have shown an increased concern with the establishment of a coherent vision of English Studies, as well as with 'bridging the gap' between A Level and university English. Such concerns can be seen clearly in the recent spate of publications intended to help first year undergraduates bridge this gap by enabling them to understand the contexts of literary study and place it within a coherent theoretical framework for English Studies. Since the rewriting of all A Level syllabuses for Curriculum 2000, too, there has been increased university influence on and interest in the A Level curriculum. A project which could throw light on A Level in relation to these issues would, I felt, be timely.

Much of the work I encountered in my literature review – both that specifically engaging with questions about English A Level, and that engaging with more general issues about literature in the English curriculum – deals with theoretical issues concerning the disciplinarity of English and the implications of such issues for school

curriculum formation and pedagogy. These accounts vary in focus, and may be divided into types as follows:

1. Those which examine curricular assumptions through analysis of syllabuses, exam papers, and policy documents (e.g., Dixon (1979), Greenwell (1988), Daw (1986), Pound (1996), Scott (1989)).

2. Those which expound progressive curricula or pedagogies based on the writers' own classroom teaching (e.g., Brown & Gifford (1989), Protherough (1986), Peim (1986), McEvoy (1991), McCulloch et al. (1993), Hopkins (2001), Jacobs (2005))

3. Those which propose alternative syllabuses or curriculum models following a theoretical analysis of current models, or give general critical accounts of policy and curriculum in terms of literary theory or the relationship between educational sectors (e.g., Flint (1982), Scott (1989), Eagleton (1985), Griffith (1987), Peim (1993), Womack (1993), Eaglestone (2000), Marland (2003), Atherton (2003, 2006), Green (2006b)).

4. Those which examine teacher or student attitudes through interviews, questionnaires and other documentary evidence (e.g., Daw (1996), Goodwyn (2002), Beavis (2001), Wisker (2001), Butcher (2003), Smith and Hopkins (2005), Green (2005a)).

5. Those which are based on observation of students and teachers at work, in order to draw conclusions about the practical manifestations of theory in curriculum content and pedagogical practice (e.g., Dixon (1979), Barnes & Barnes (1984), Sarland (1991), Leahy-Dios (1996), Mitchell (1994), Ballinger (2002), Barry (2002)).

In relation specifically to A Level, a great deal of work has been done in the first three areas, and recently some substantial survey work in the fourth area (Green, 2005a; Smith and Hopkins 2005); but, in the fourth and (especially) fifth areas, there are few detailed accounts of the ways in which disciplinary and curricular tension manifest themselves in the experience of students and teachers in A Level courses, or of the immediate effects of such experience on the learning, understanding and attitudes of students to their subject. Considerable research has been undertaken on the general

attitudes of English teachers to the discipline of English[90] and to issues concerning cultural value and the responses of young people in secondary school English[91]. However, I was surprised by how little work of this sort has been done specifically in relation to the Sixth Form phase, and in particular to the advanced study of literature, whether at GCSE, in the Sixth Form or in HE.

A number of studies do broadly address A Level in this way. Dixon (1979) and Adams & Hopkins (1981) base their general comments on the future of Sixth Form English on evidence from a wide range of case studies of A Level teaching, although both texts adopt a broad-brush approach. Barnes & Barnes (1984) set their study of A Level teaching in the wider context of a set of multi-method case studies of 11-18 English teaching, and base it largely on observation – as does the HMI survey of 1986. Leahy-Dios (1996) undertakes a comparative study of an A Level English class in England with one in Brazil, with her analysis based on lesson observations and teacher interviews. Apart from Barry's MA study of her own A Level group, (2002) I could not find another record of a detailed case study of a group of students and their teachers engaged in the study of literature at A Level, let alone one which paid particular attention to issues of cultural value and disciplinary philosophy. Such a project could helpfully illuminate the interplay of teaching, learning and literary response at a highly formative point in literary education – and indeed Barry's thesis raises some extremely interesting issues along these lines.

However, whilst a case study of an A Level Literature group at work would clearly be a potentially interesting and valuable study, I felt that this would not necessarily be an effective way to produce data which enabled me to understand and reflect further on the relationship between A Level and university English which I had identified through my literature review as a particularly significant area for attention. As an A Level teacher myself, I already had considerable experience of A Level students, teachers and

[90] Marshall (2000), for instance, uses teachers' responses to textual descriptions of English teachers to evaluate their philosophies, whilst Protherough & Atkinson (1991) study a group of English teachers through their responses in questionnaires and interviews.

[91] Sarland (1991), for instance, is one of a number of writers, mainly approaching from the perspective of media and popular culture rather than literature, to examine younger students' cultural values through their responses to texts and learning about texts in and out of school.

classrooms, but I had virtually no experience of the progression of students from A Level in terms of their learning or of the curriculum, pedagogy and attitudes they might encounter.

Furthermore, I could find very little evidence of empirical work based on classroom observation relating to the nature of progression from A Level English, in particular with regard to the transition to university. Mitchell (1994) writes – in the context of a wider study of writing in universities – about a detailed study of one student's transition between school English and university English, based on readings of her essays, along with seminar observations and discussions with the student. More recently, Ballinger (2002) – a university lecturer – observed a small number of A Level lessons in a very small-scale study. Again, however, whilst considerable research of a general kind has been done into transition between school and university,[92] I could not find a record of an in-depth case study of transition from A Level to university English which examined the experiences of a number of different students and teachers using a variety of methods. Indeed, I could find no record of an in-depth study of teaching and learning in university English,[93] although one major project of this kind (Jones et al., 2005) is currently in progress.[94] I therefore determined to focus my study on the transition between A Level and university English, with a particular intention to use data about this progression from A Level in order to draw conclusions about the A Level course and its relationship with the wider discipline of English.

Formulating a research project

Mitchell's work, ten years earlier, as part of a larger research project into the writing of argument in further and higher education, offered a valuable model for the analysis of students' progression from A Level through the observation and interviewing of a first year undergraduate. However, whilst her study of an English undergraduate was

[92] For instance, Wisker et al. (2001), and the Higher Education Academy's Stage One Student Experience project

[93] Evans (1993), in his study of HE English, cites Davies' reference to 'the absence of documentary and ethnographic information about the routines of Literature teaching in Higher Education' (Widdowson (1982), p.35). Evans' book was intended to 'redress the balance somewhat' (p. ix), though the study was based on interviews with lecturers only.

[94] I discuss this project further in the last chapter of this thesis.

part of a larger cross-curricular project on the writing of argument, I wanted to take a closer look at the nature of the discipline of literary study and at students' and teachers' attitudes, expectations and understandings of it. I therefore decided that I wanted to focus my fieldwork on the experience of both students and lecturers in the first year of a university English course, examining (a) what students know about and can do in English Literature as a result of their A level study, (b) how students make sense of the very different approaches to English dominant at university, and of the problems and successes they encounter as they attempt to build on and make links with what they have learnt at A Level, and (c) how lecturers work with the students who are the products of the A Level course, and understand the nature of their progression. I also wanted to focus this investigation on questions related to reading and response rather than writing, as my own experiences, and evidence from my literature review – as well as evidence from Mitchell's project – suggested that the processes of assimilation, conceptualisation and evaluation which precede writing are both crucial and often under-estimated in understanding students' progress in the subject.

Such a study would enable me not only to reflect on the nature of the A Level course through a study of its immediate graduates, but also to reflect on the nature of the relationship between school and university English – the extent to which A Level English provides an appropriate preparation for understanding and engaging with the discipline at university, as well as the extent to which university English enables students to progress effectively from their A Level studies. This relationship is important not only because of the immediate experience of A Level students going on to read English at university, but also because of the implications of such curricular tensions for the construction of the discipline, for the way students experience the continuum of the subject and, in particular, for the cycle of teacher education and training and thus, by extension, for all students of English, including those not intending to read English (or indeed anything) at university. Although this would be a study of transition from A Level to university, I wanted to steer away from the idea of a study concerned more narrowly and pragmatically with identifying problems in 'bridging the gap' between school and university for first-year undergraduates. In particular, I felt that this study should enable me to examine ways in which issues of literary and cultural value and response underpin the subject at different levels of the education system, and are reflected in the attitudes and perceptions of both students and

teachers to literary study; it should also offer an opportunity to reflect on whether the more theoretical and socio-cultural approaches to literature dominant at university might constitute a way forward for A Level.

Formulating research questions

My chief interest in this study would be to follow the development of students' conceptual awareness in literary study, including their attitudes to and understandings of the value and/or significance of the study, and their perceptions of the discipline at both A Level and university. In particular, I wanted to examine the way in which the tensions between 'reading,' 'literature' and 'criticism' – a recurrent theme in my own teaching experience and in the debates covered by my literature review – worked themselves out in the teaching and learning experiences of students and teachers. I wanted to find out more about the relationship between students' personal understandings of and responses to literature and those transmitted to or encountered by them during the course. Additionally, I was interested in lecturers' attitudes to their teaching, their perceptions of their students' attitudes and values, and their understandings of and attitudes to the differences between the discipline at A Level and university. How effectively would students be able to assimilate and conceptualise broad socio-cultural or theoretical approaches to literature or questions about the nature of literary value and interpretation, given their move from an environment in which they are unlikely to have been introduced to these? How would they develop their understanding of the functions of literature, literary study and literary criticism? How would they develop a sense of the place of their own responses in relation to wider issues of interpretation and difference? To what extent would lecturers grasp and accommodate such potential difficulties, taking into account students' conceptual starting points and uncertainties, and their attitudes and values? To what extent would they make explicit the theoretical frameworks students might need in order to reconcile differing models of literary study?

Taking these questions – based on my initial theoretical assumptions and practical experiences – I returned to my initial research questions as a foundation for my empirical study, using them to guide the collection and analysis of data. As indicated in my introductory chapter, the principal research question was:

- *What issues, in relation to the theoretical and conceptual framework of literary study, do first year undergraduates and their lecturers engage with in the transition between secondary and higher English?*

My overall concern here would be to examine the tensions which emerge when different models of English meet – the A Level model in the guise of the students and the HE model in the guise of the lecturers – as well as to test the extent to which two such models actually exist. I would want to explore the nature of characteristic approaches to the subject at HE, and examine the way in which these manifest themselves in terms both of course content and of pedagogical application. I would want to examine the ways in which this model might conflict with the A Level model, and the ways in which such conflict might be seen in the communication between students and lecturers in seminars and lectures, and in the reflections of both on their experiences.

I also formulated two subsidiary questions which would provide focuses for examining the issues at stake in the first question:

- *What kinds of theoretical and conceptual understanding does A Level equip students with, and how do these develop and change during the first year undergraduate course?*

This question was intended to allow me to focus on the evidence that students carry with them onto the first year university course about the teaching and learning that have taken place at A Level, and the resulting understandings of the subject that students have. Here, I would want to explore the extent to which students had previously theorised their learning in English, and in particular the extent to which they had been able to reflect on the purposes of and differences between, for instance, reading, literature, criticism, and literary study. I would want to ascertain the types of knowledge about literature and literary study that students arrive at university with, and the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that students have in place for an understanding of the discipline. I would want to observe the ways in which they might find their existing knowledge and understanding challenged or confirmed by the first year course, and the difficulties and successes they might encounter in these respects as the course progressed.

- *What are lecturers' and students' attitudes to and perceptions of A Level English, university English and the transition between them?*

Here, it would be my intention to focus on the broader attitudes of students and lecturers to their subject, and to the nature and purpose of the project of 'doing English', revealed mainly through interviews, but perhaps also through the dispositions of students and lecturers in the classroom and the lecture theatre. I would want to consider the way in which students' attitudes to the study of literature had been shaped by their experiences before university, and the extent to which those attitudes had been influenced by A Level, as well as their views about the content and nature of the A Level course and the first year university course, and about the teaching and learning which takes place in each. I would want to explore the way in which lecturers perceive and account for the 'gap' between A Level and Higher English, and the extent to which they see the potential for resolution of resultant tensions.

I also added a third subsidiary question in order to address more directly issues about learning and pedagogy:

- *What curricular and pedagogical strategies are employed within the HE course selected for study to support students' transition from A Level to university English?*

Here I would be concerned with the decisions made by lecturers in relation to the presentation of curriculum through course structure and classroom pedagogy, both in the light of students' previous learning experiences and in the light of the way in which they responded during the first year course.

2. Designing and locating the project

A qualitative case study approach

These research questions clearly pointed to a qualitative rather than a quantitative research project, a case-study focusing on the discovery of underlying attitudes and thought processes through an analysis of observations of students and teachers at work, and discussions with them about that work. It might, through structured questionnaires and interviews, be possible to ascertain quantitatively, to some extent, a range of students' and lecturers' broad attitudes to first year university English and the transition from A Level, and, in very broad terms, what they felt they had taught or learnt. It would, however, be difficult by such means to discover the experiences and motivations which had led to these positions, the underlying assumptions, attitudes and

values which informed them, or to trace the development of disciplinary knowledge and understanding. A case-study based on semi-structured interviews and observation would offer a more exploratory approach which would enable me to allow individual voices and experiences to emerge, and would provide a 'holistic, intensive description and interpretation of a phenomenon' (Merriam (1998), p. 9).

In her recent study, Marshall (2000) adopted a different and ingenious approach to the same kind of problem. Pointing out that her academic training as an English specialist meant that 'although [her] desire to find the implicit subject philosophies of English teachers was the question of a social scientist, the tools that [she] felt [she] had for discovering them lay more with the art of criticism than anything else' (p.1), she asked teachers to analyse and annotate her written description of a range of subject philosophies, an approach combining the breadth and efficiency of a questionnaire with the depth of an interview. In my study, however, I wanted to observe the *actualisation* of such philosophies in the classroom, and to achieve depth by triangulating observations and student/teacher interview discussions (Merriam (1998), Cohen et al (2007)), allowing for an insight into the way in which the discipline is constructed in practice, and into the nature of the discourses and cultural interactions which take place between students and teachers. This kind of approach, though non-ethnographic, contains resonances of ethnography, since it attempts to understand a cultural process or context through extended on-site, real-time exposure to a particular cultural group or institution, and through a variety of methods of data collection (Fetterman (1989), Robson (1993)).

Such an approach, including classroom observations, interviews with teachers, discussions with student focus groups, and analysis of documents, is adopted by Kress et al. (2005) in their recent large-scale research project 'The Production of School English.' They write that English in schools is 'constructed, and reconstructed, day after day, in the work of teachers, teaching in contexts over which they never have full control, which are subject to the influence of policy, institution, department and students, and shaped also by a wider politics of education'. In their study, they hope to capture 'the moment of the subject's actualisation in the practice of the teacher… identifying the ways in which teachers draw from the academic disciplines that stand

behind the school subject' and 'sketching the ways in which they position their teaching against the various paradigms of the subject' (p.18).[95]

A multi-method, layered case study approach

With these kinds of principles in mind, it seemed important to formulate a case-study design which would enable breadth as well as depth of understanding as far as possible.[96] Thus I decided to design a multi-method, layered case study, in order to obtain a variety of types of data from a variety of sources which would enable me to approach my research questions from a number of different, more or less broad or detailed, perspectives:

- At the broadest level, that of the ***cohort***, I would observe lectures, gaining an understanding of the broad shared experiences of a first-year course within a university, and of the way departments and lecturers construct a framework for the discipline through these lectures.
- At the next level, I would observe ***seminar groups***, gaining an understanding of the collective experience of the seminar, the strategies and approaches of lecturers, the reactions and attitudes of students, and the construction of the discipline through teacher/student interaction.
- At the next level, I would work with a specially-created ***focus group*** consisting of a number of students within a seminar group, gaining broad insights into students' attitudes to and perceptions of both the A Level and the university courses, in particular course content and learning processes, and their understanding of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the courses.
- Finally, I would work separately with a number of ***individual students and lecturers***, gaining more detailed insights into their motivations, attitudes, and understandings, and into their diverse experiences in different sixth forms at A Level.

[95] They go on to say that '[their] work moves beyond the 'actualisation' paradigm, as they seek to understand these texts [which teachers create 'in their communicational practice'] socially' (p.19), in particular through a multimodal approach.

[96] Merriam (1998) comments that 'the opportunity to use multiple methods of data collection is a major strength of case study research' (p. 69).

Locating the project

At the outset, one important choice to be made was whether to conduct a study based in one university only, or to make comparisons between universities. There were considerable advantages to basing the study in one university. First, this would allow me to follow one course consistently for a whole year and achieve a thorough understanding of the progression of a particular group of students through observing a complete course and entering into its culture, building a detailed ethnographic element into the project. A comparative study would have meant sampling several courses as an occasional visitor, thereby possibly missing important formative moments in the experience of both students and lecturers on the course. Second, the logistics of working with more than one university, almost certainly in more than one town, would have been extremely difficult.

The limitation of using one university only was clearly that it might be difficult to generalise from the experience of one first-year course when there is considerable variation in first-year courses throughout the country and in different types of university. On the other hand, there was no reason why the students attending the course should not be representative of other universities, as they would come from a wide range of different schools and would almost all have studied A Level English Literature, thus 'sharing certain essential characteristics with other groups' (Robson (1993), p.72). Thus, even if the course in question were different from other courses, an analysis of the students' progression from A Level should provide data which would be valid more generally. As Evans (1993) puts it in *English People*, his study of HE English teachers:

> My concern is less with the question 'How representative is this?' than with the question 'What does this represent? … I am under no illusion that by the end of this book I will be able to give a succinct statement of what the experience of English People essentially is, or what the discipline essentially means. But I hope to have explored some general tensions which go beyond the experience of any individual, which are relevant for all English People and for all people concerned with higher education and the humanities (p. x)

This, however, raised the question of what kind of university would be appropriate for the project, if my focus were not to be comparative between universities. In one sense,

the choice was unimportant, as the project envisaged reflecting generally on the experience of first year students and lecturers at university, taking into account the specific circumstances in which they found themselves. Whichever type of university I chose – Oxbridge, the Russell Group, the red-bricks, the different types of new university, etc. – would have its own set of characteristics, making it difficult to make a clearly representative choice; however, I felt that it would be sensible to aim for the 'middle of the range' - a high-profile new university or one of the less prestigious of the established universities - in an attempt to achieve some form of representativeness. At a time of widening participation in sixth form and higher education, it certainly seemed sensible to focus on a constituency of students who did not represent an elite within the university system.

Having decided to base the project in one university, similar questions emerged concerning classes. Would it be best to follow one class or to sample several classes? Again, and for very similar reasons, I decided that it would be best to follow one class. This would allow me to work closely with one group, observing their interactions over the entire course. My shared experience of the course with all the students and lecturers of one class would enable us to use a common framework of references in our discussions, and would help me to understand their responses, feelings and attitudes.

Access: selecting and approaching the university

I approached a university close to my home in order to try to set up the project. This decision was not only related to convenience; the university in question, a 'new' university, is one of the most well-known and successful new universities in the country, with an equally well-known and successful English department. Some previous experience with another similar university in another city (with which I had become briefly involved three years earlier during some initial research) had indicated that this environment might well be fertile ground for such a project; in a climate of widening participation and competition with the older universities, many of the new universities were particularly active in providing access to their courses through innovation in teaching and learning, especially because of their often non-traditional intakes, and in the light of a series of recent teaching and learning initiatives in higher education.

Having made contact with the department, I was able to establish the project without problem. I contacted a senior and long-standing member of the department whose work on pedagogy and curriculum in Higher Education English is well-known, and provided him with an account of myself and my proposed project. He was interested in my research and happy to help, and felt that the mechanics of the project would be easily arranged. He was also happy to act as my mentor at the institution throughout the project. He consulted the head of department, who agreed to the project. Their only reservation was that the proposed year for the fieldwork (2003/4) was the last year of their current course, which was to receive a major overhaul in the following year. They would have preferred me to do the fieldwork in 2004/5, as this might have been of greater benefit to them in providing them with data about the success of the new course; however, I agreed that I would go back during 2004/5 to observe part of the new course too.

Negotiating data collection

It was agreed that I would attend lectures and seminars in the core English modules throughout the year. Additionally, with their permission, I would have access to lecturers and students for interviews, and to students' written work. Provided that a group of students could be recruited – preferably within the class to which I was allocated for the first module - I would follow one group of between six and eight students in detail. (Seven seemed an appropriate number so that the group provided sufficient variety in order to make some generalisations and examine different trajectories, without being too large such that detailed interpretation became difficult (Kvale (1996)) or too large for the purposes of group discussion.)

The selection of the class I was to follow was left up to the department, since the principles on which the groups were organised meant that any group should be fairly representative; it was decided that I would follow the group assigned to my initial contact in the department. As seminar groups changed at the end of the first term, it would not be possible to follow the same class all year, so I would follow one class for the first module in the first term and a different one for the second module in the second and third term. The focus group would, by arrangement, be kept together for both the modules. Although this was an intervention in the normal process, it was felt that it would not affect the experience of the students in question more significantly than their being part of a focus group would already have done.

Data collection for the project would therefore consist of the following:

- Observation of all lectures in core first year English course
- Observation of all sessions of one seminar group each term
- A questionnaire survey of the seminar groups
- Focus group interviews – complete group and individually
- Interviews with each of the class teachers
- Obtaining copies of the written assignments of all focus group students
- Obtaining all course documentation issued to students

Selecting the focus group

Once the university term had begun, selecting the sample group of students from within the class did not prove difficult. During the first seminar session, I gave out a basic factual questionnaire, with two purposes – first, to establish a social and educational profile for the group and for the individuals within it; and second, to assist in constructing a focus group which provided a balance of types – especially in terms of social and educational background. In selecting for the group, my first move was to ask students to return a slip to me if they would be prepared to volunteer, on the principle that any volunteers might well make a sufficiently balanced group, and that it would be more difficult to recruit non-volunteers. I made it clear that I might also approach students who did not volunteer, but that at no point was any student obliged to take part; I also ruled out of the sample students who had not taken A Levels recently. In fact, eight students volunteered, who, between them, formed a well-balanced and representative group. All eight students agreed to attend the focus group sessions, and, although only six of the eight were transferred together into the second module, seven of the eight continued to attend for the whole year.

I give further details about the balance of the group and the individuals within it in the data and analysis chapter; however it is worth pointing out at this stage that, though the group was statistically fairly representative of the seminar group and the student body more widely, I was aware that I needed to take into account the self-selecting nature of the students in the group. In other words, I needed to be aware that to some extent these students were different from the others students in the group by dint of the fact that they had volunteered, whilst the others hadn't. This, for instance,

might suggest some particular motivating factors in these students. I reflect on this further in the next chapter.

Ethical issues: integrity, consent and confidentiality

In undertaking to work with, study and report on the behaviour and attitudes of any group of people, the major over-arching ethical issue must surely be the need to behave with integrity and consideration towards them, both in the technicalities of the collection of data, and in recognising the need for openness about the perspectives and methods being applied (Bera (2004); Scott and Usher (1999), p. 128). The account of the collection and analysis of the data which occupies the remainder of this chapter includes a number of references to ways in which I attempted to carry out my data collection and analysis with regard to these principles – for instance, through attempting to minimise harmful intervention in students' and lecturers' work, and through attempting to record and represent their actions and attitudes accurately, whilst examining and acknowledging the effects of my own attitudes and identities on my capacity for objectivity. It was, however, also necessary to engage with two very specific issues in this regard: obtaining the consent of the students and lecturers I was proposing to work with, and guaranteeing confidentiality in my dealings with them.

The question of consent depended to some extent on the provision of information. With regard to lecturers, I had, as already explained, received general departmental permission to attend seminars and lectures, and my contact in the department – whose seminars I attended in the first term – negotiated permission for me to attend the seminars of two other lecturers in the second and third terms (Cohen (2007), p. 55). With each individual lecturer, I negotiated questions about the use of the tape recorder and the nature of my presence in the classroom, as well as procedures for interviews with them. It was not felt necessary to obtain permission from all the seminar students for my presence in the classroom, as this had already been negotiated with the lecturer in charge; however, in the first seminar session at the beginning of each module, I handed an information sheet to every student informing them of the reasons for my presence and the presence of the tape recorder, briefly outlining the nature of the research project, asking them to fill in a questionnaire (but only if they wished to do so), and making clear that if any of them had concerns about the project, they could approach me or the lecturer to discuss them. Later, when I had selected students for the focus group from volunteers, I asked those students to confirm with a

signature that they had consented to help me with my research in extra-seminar sessions, whilst making it clear that they were not in any way compelled to continue with their commitment if they did not wish to).

We felt it important that at no point did the seminar lecturer exert any pressure, explicit or otherwise, on students to participate in either filling in questionnaires for me or volunteering for my focus group, and so we carefully managed the few occasions when I handed out information to students or spoke to the class as a whole to ensure that it was clear that, although my presence in the room was clearly supported by the lecturer, I was nevertheless acting entirely independently, and that it would be of no concern to the lecturer who participated and who did not (Robson (1993), p. 31). During these interventions, for instance, the lecturer might occupy himself with paperwork in a corner of the room, and refrain from watching the proceedings. On one occasion I agreed with the lecturer that I could use five minutes of a seminar to get students to fill in a short-answer questionnaire: it would be disingenuous to suggest that there was no pressure on students in this case to complete the questionnaire, as otherwise they would have had to sit doing nothing for five minutes. Nevertheless, participation was voluntary, and the lecturer was not involved.

There were two issues with regard to confidentiality. First, I guaranteed that anything that students or lecturers said to me would remain confidential, and that I would not pass such information on in conversation in such a way that individuals could be identified by name. This was a particularly vital point in reassuring students that my interventions with lecturers would not affect their relationship with those lecturers or their assessment of them (Bassey (1997), p. 78; Cohen (2007), p. 64). It was also important that lecturers should be confident that I would not pass on information obtained from them to students. Second was the issue of confidentiality in the reporting of my research (Cohen (2007), p. 63); I guaranteed to lecturers and students that the names of the university, the lecturers and the students would be anonymised (using pseudonyms) so that they could not be recognised – although it was agreed that I could not guarantee that certain individuals might not nevertheless be recognised by other people in the same cohort or department because of certain descriptions or statements in the data. Indeed, as Cohen et al. point out (p. 64), ' a subject agreeing to a face-to-face interview can in no way expect anonymity. At most the interviewer can promise confidentiality.'

3. Collecting the data

The role of the researcher

All research constitutes an intervention, and qualitative methods are perhaps particularly susceptible in this respect. In order to engage honestly in such research, it is necessary to reflect on the nature of the researcher's intervention and the potential for bias. Even in a non-participant observing and interviewing role, my presence at the university constituted an intervention in the normal running of the institution, and the various relationships I necessarily formed during the project meant that this intervention had various potential effects, both on the way students and lecturers behaved, and on the way I as researcher interpreted and understood my observations.

In carrying out the project, I became aware of the multiple positions that I took as researcher. First, there was a tension between my role as detached researcher-observer in a university, and my past experience as a secondary school English teacher. On the one hand, I was a graduate student of education simply observing; on the other, however, I was an experienced recent Head of English in a secondary school, inevitably approaching my research from that viewpoint. In my interactions with both students and teachers, it was clear that the shared understanding of my background would affect the way they responded to me, and me to them, to a certain extent.

In dealing with the students, I was concerned at times that my status as a secondary school teacher might make them unwilling to express their views freely: they had all spent the last two years being taught A Level by people like me and thus would have a clear view of the kind of values I represented in terms of English and education generally. Although I tried to impress on them, through the way that I presented myself, that I wanted them to be honest about their experiences and feelings, I doubt whether I was able to access certain aspects of these. (On the other hand, of course, it's possible that my status as education researcher may have been as inhibiting as my status as teacher.) In dealing with the lecturers, it was also clear that I was more than a neutral researcher, and that, as a member of the secondary school community, I was a representative of a group of people with whom they were professionally connected in a very particular way. Again, I tried to counter this through my self-presentation, but the nature of our dialogue must have been shaped to some extent by this.

Second, there was a tension between my alignment with the students and my alignment with the teachers. My chief focus was the experience of the first-year students as ex-A Level students, and thus I was aligned with them in that I was, as it were, 'moving up' to university with them and experiencing the course as they experienced it, and observing the lecturers as they (the students) observed them (the lecturers). On the other hand, I was aligned with the lecturers in many important respects. The lecturers were my first point of contact in terms of accessing the classes, and it was necessary for me to make arrangements with the lecturer between seminars and talk with the lecturer at the end of each seminar. It was clear that I was aligned with the lecturers also in terms of standing outside the experience of students and observing them. In this respect, despite the explicit confidentiality framework that existed, it may have been that my perceived alignment with the lecturers was a further inhibiting factor in my dialogue with the students, whilst my perceived alignment with the students was an inhibiting factor in my dialogue with the teachers. In the light of these tensions, it was interesting that when I asked students in my focus group how they had felt about the group sessions, one said that they had been useful because I was 'on the teachers' side' but that they could talk to me more freely than to the teachers.

Finally, I found that my own experience of the project was affected by my own personal viewpoints beyond that of researcher – in particular as teacher. As teacher, I was very much aware that the students I was following were the kinds of students I had been teaching A Level to for many years. The nature of A level classes – with a great deal of personal contact and dialogue between teacher and individual students – means that A Level teaching offers considerable insight into the culture and mind-sets of the young people with whom one is involved. I also shared with them a detailed knowledge of the kind of educational experiences they had had until now. I felt strongly that I was able to identify with their experiences and, to a certain extent, share and sympathise with their reactions to what they experienced. My instinctive sympathies lay in some senses with the students, who were representative for me of those that I had 'nurtured' myself while a teacher – and I was keen to see what happened to them (and, by extension, my own students) once they moved on to university. I experienced some indignation when I felt, as I sometimes did, that they were being 'let down' by their experience at university.

This feeling was strengthened by my own viewpoints as quasi-student and as ex-student. I was quasi-student in that, in lectures and seminars, I sat 'on the side of' the students, and experienced the content of the course as well as its delivery. As a mature graduate student whose own undergraduate course began exactly twenty years previously, I was in the extraordinary position of sitting through another first-year undergraduate course twenty years later. This course was different from the course I did as an undergraduate in almost every respect, most notably in its theoretical content. Although I had never formally studied literary theory or experienced an English course organised around related theoretical frameworks, I did have a self-obtained broad overview of the content and significance of literary theory; nevertheless, much of the content of the lectures was in many senses new to me, too.

I also brought to the sessions a strong personal engagement as ex-student, in the sense that what had led me to undertake this research project was a long personal process of coming to terms with the meanings and purposes of teaching and studying English – a process which had in many ways originated with my own undergraduate course (as explained elsewhere), which I felt had severely let me down as a student. I was conscious that I very much wanted this course to equip these students with a better framework for studying English and a better understanding of the subject than the undergraduate course I myself had experienced.

On the other hand, my self-identification as researcher also enabled me to distance myself from my self-identification as schoolteacher and student. In a research context, I was looking very differently at A Level from the way I did as a teacher – partly because of new theoretical knowledge I had gained and new thinking I had done about it – and this in some senses brought me closer to the position of the lecturer, looking with a colder, more critical eye on the phenomenon of English A Level.

In collecting and interpreting data during the project, it was important for me to acknowledge that these factors would inevitably come into play. In the specific comments below about collecting data through observations and interviews, I engage more concretely with the way such issues manifested themselves 'on the ground'.

Collecting data from observations

Observation of lectures and seminars offered me the opportunity to see the work of the course in action, as a basis for drawing conclusions about the nature of the curriculum and pedagogy, and the interaction between staff and students. As well as providing data which allowed me to make some judgements about the teaching and learning processes at play, (founded on my background knowledge of the underlying issues, and on my own experiences as a teacher of sixth form students and observer of lessons and classrooms in a school context),[97] the observations gave me the opportunity to share the experience of seminars and lectures with students and teachers, so that we were able to share a strong frame of reference in subsequent interviews. As I attended all the core lectures and all the associated seminars of one class, I was able to locate students' and teachers' comments clearly in relation to the actual events of the course, confident that I had not missed significant formative events. This longitudinal aspect to the study was intended to be a vital contribution to the validity of the project, enabling me to achieve an immersion in the course which should allow a complex picture to emerge of the dynamics of the course (Cohen et al. (2007) p. 405).

In all observations, my role was essentially as a non-participant – although as I was present, visible and known as researcher and English teacher to all participants in seminars and some in lectures, I was in some senses a participant.[98] In collecting data through observations, I had to take into account the effect and effectiveness of my role as observer, evaluating the extent to which my presence as observer, especially in seminars, might affect the course of events, and the validity of my observations. Non-participant observation is in some senses a more objective stance than participant observation and may thus, in some ways, constitute less of an intervention in the events being observed. Nevertheless, the presence of observer must always constitute an intervention; I had to take steps to minimise the level of intervention, whilst remaining realistic about the possible effects of the intervention (Merriam (1988) p. 95;

[97] Although not a teacher-researcher in this particular project, it was inevitable that I would bring my complex inside knowledge of students, teachers, schools and classrooms to bear on my observations.

[98] Cohen et al (2000) cite Gold's classification of observers as either complete participant, participant-as observer, observer-as-participant or complete observer (p.397). On this continuum, my role was clearly observer-as-participant.

Cohen (2007), p. 410). Likewise, I had to recognise the inevitably limited nature of the objectivity of my observations, whilst taking steps, through a structured approach to note-making and the eventual presentation of data through transcription, to provide sound evidence for my observations, and for the contexts in which my interpretations would be placed (Cohen et al (2007), Merriam (1988)).

Cohen et al. (2000) list four main types of data that may be gathered through observations – data about the physical setting, the human setting, the interactional setting and the programme setting (p. 397). Whilst all these types of data were vital and relevant, it was clear that by far the most substantial and the most highly variable aspect for my purposes was the interactional setting. Whilst the other factors remained fairly constant from session to session, the interactive content was almost entirely different each time; and it was from the interaction that I was able to observe the conceptual content of the course and most of the pedagogical strategies. Thus, whilst I recorded observations on all four aspects in my research notes, the bulk of my notes described and commented on the interaction I observed. I adopted a semi-structured approach to observation, (p. 397), allowing key issues to emerge but with a clear set of pre-determined focuses for observation, developed from my research questions.

Attending lectures

I decided that it was sensible to record seminars on tape, but not lectures. For lectures, as they are essentially planned, formal monologue, it was straightforward to note their content in outline, including key themes and uses of terminology, as well as observations about the physical environment and conduct of the lecture, and my own more subjective thoughts about what I was observing. Perhaps the process of note-taking also brought me closer to understanding the experience of the students in the lecture, who were also attempting to note the content of the lecture in outline. In this respect, I was more of a participant observer in lectures than in seminars.

During lectures, in fact, I sat amongst the students and took notes. Using the course handbook as a guide, I noted the structure and main points of each lecture, and any observations about the attendance and approaches of the students, and the approach of the lecturer. I also made basic observations about the visual and physical elements of the situation, although these were insubstantial owing to the very formal nature of the

lectures. I made notes on my reactions to the teaching and learning process as it was taking place – my attempts to gauge what students might be learning from the lecture based on my knowledge of their previous experiences both in A Level and in the undergraduate course so far. My presence in the lecture room, along with 200 or so students, can have had little effect on proceedings, especially since many of the students and lecturers would not have known who I was; however, when the lecture was given by one of the seminar leaders with whom I had been working, as it occasionally was, it is possible that their awareness of me in the lecture theatre may have affected their delivery – in a similar way, perhaps, that the known presence of an inspector or evaluator of some kind might have done.

Attending seminars

Seminars were more spontaneous and dialogic in nature than lectures, more fast-moving and unpredictable. The dialogue between students and teachers constituted significant evidence about the teaching and learning process, and was harder to record in note form. I therefore decided, with the permission of the lecturers, that I would tape-record seminars. The effect of my presence in the classroom was amplified, in this case, by the presence of a tape-recorder; using the tape-recorder, however, freed me to note elements of the seminars which would not be evident on the tape-recording, notably visual and physical aspects, such as the attendance and approaches of the students, and the approach of the lecturer, as well as key events, an outline of the seminar structure and content, and other interpretive observations. Again, I made notes on my reactions to the teaching and learning process as it was taking place – my attempts to gauge what students might be learning from the seminar based on my knowledge of their previous experiences both in A Level and in the undergraduate course so far, and my observations about the pedagogy and theoretical approach of the lecturer.

In practice, I sat at the back of the classroom, behind the students, and facing the lecturer. In the first term, I used a small analogue tape recorder with microphone attached, which I set up at the very back of the classroom, to record the seminar. In the second and third terms, I used a much more compact digital recorder, which I placed in the middle of the classroom. In addition to recording, I made notes on the structure and main points of the session, recorded my thoughts on the teaching and learning process taking place, and noted down visual factors which would not have

been accessible through the tape recordings. In fact, as the seminars were rather formal, highly static and highly teacher-led, little useful data emerged from the visual aspects of the sessions, beyond some basic observations about the general physical layout and dynamics of the sessions, and the grouping of the students, and occasional observations about student and teacher attitude.

The tape recorder was almost entirely ignored by both students and lecturers in both situations and did not appear to exert any substantial inhibiting influence in either. My presence in the classroom must have had some effect on what actually happened during the seminars, though my feeling is that it was not substantial. I certainly did not feel that I inhibited or affected the response of the class, whom I was generally sitting behind in any substantial way, and who seemed to forget about me after a while, as I was a discreet presence in the class every week. Given the relatively formal nature of the contact between lecturer and students in the seminars, I did not feel that I had the effect of substantially inhibiting or changing the approach of the lecturer, although it was clear that my presence might well have focused the lecturers more firmly on issues of teaching and learning than if I had not been there. Indeed one lecturer in particular seemed, in his comments to me, rather conscious of my potentially evaluative role as observer, whilst others suggested that my presence and my discussions with them had given them some stimulus in reflecting on and planning seminars.

As I have already suggested, there was a sense in which I was aligned with the lecturer in these seminars. I often entered the room, and generally left the room, with the lecturer, and usually engaged in brief discussion of what had happened in the seminar with the lecturer afterwards. Occurring after the end of the seminar, and usually outside the classroom, these conversations were un-recorded, yet they were in a sense part of the experience of the seminar, and a form of participation on my part. Although, as I have said, one lecturer was keen to hear my comments on each seminar, I tried to avoid evaluative comments about the lecturer's approach, but rather focused either on general comments about issues which had arisen in the seminar or comments about the performance of the students, or on issues which had arisen relating to A Level. Whatever comments I made, I attempted to couch them in as neutral terms as possible so as not to appear to criticise or unduly influence the lecturer. However, in entering into friendly and substantial discussion with the

lecturers in this way, it was inevitable that we would discuss issues about curriculum and pedagogy which would not only inform my research but also engage with and have an effect on the lecturers' work. Such effects would need to be taken into account in dealing with the observation data.

Collecting data from interviews

If the observations of lectures and seminars were important in establishing a shared experience between myself as researcher and the students and teachers, the interview sessions were the forum in which my interpretations of what had happened on the course could be tested and refined, and my understandings of the teaching and learning process could be developed. Crucially, as well as enabling certain trends to be identified, these interviews provided insight into the ways in which different students and teachers (and the different ways in which students and teachers) made sense of the course and made meanings from it. Kvale (1996) comments that 'it is a strength of the interview conversation to capture the multitude of subjects' views of a theme and to picture a manifold and controversial human world – even if such views appear to be contradictory (p.7)'; in this way the interviews could be particularly useful in identifying convergences and divergences in attitudes, understandings and expectations. Wengraf (2001) also comments on the different types of information that an interview can yield – not only information about the themes of the interview - 'objective referents' - but also about the types of discourse available to interviewees - 'discursive productions and performances' - and interviewees' subjectivity (pp. 8/9). Other commentators cite, for instance, the flexibility and spontaneity of interviews, the depth of insight they can provide, and the rapport with interviewees they can build up (Cohen et al. (2007), Oppenheim (1992), Robson (1993)) as other benefits of the method. All of these were strongly desirable, given the nature of the research.

In planning interviews and constructing interview schedules, a range of factors needed to be taken into account. I adopted the semi-structured interview approach as this gave me the flexibility to control discussions whilst allowing interviewees the freedom to expand on their thoughts and enter into discussion where appropriate, using what Wengraf describes as 'the basic unit of the semi-structured interview': 'the open question with prompt-supported answering and interviewer listening (p. 158).' For each interview, I constructed a schedule, set out, as Wengraf suggests is logical, in sections, each headed with a 'theory question' and followed by the actual interview

questions designed to elicit the information required to address the theory question (p.162), as well as a number of potential prompt questions. I took some care with the wording of questions in order to make them accessible and appropriate for the interviewees – clearly a major issue with respect to whether the interviewee was to be a student or teacher.[99] I also considered the most appropriate sequence for questioning, though often this would change if the direction of the discussion suggested the need for this.

As both Wengraf and Kvale suggest, it seemed vital to make the interview an interesting and rewarding experience for interviewees in order to retain the co-operation of these 'rich and willing informants' (Wengraf p.105) as well as to repay their investment in the project. In the interviews themselves, I attempted to put interviewees at ease and adopt what Wengraf calls a 'receptive strategy' (p.154) – an encouraging and open manner and an active listening approach – and to manage the 'double attention' (p.194) required to listen and respond whilst also making decisions about where to take the interview next, or how to phrase or rephrase questions in order to elicit the kind of answers needed, at the level of generality or specificity required. I made sure that I gave brief but generous feedback to interviewees about the helpfulness of their participation, and tried to frame each interview with a brief rationale for the topic and a debriefing if appropriate (Kvale, p. 128).

I was aware of the need to word questions in order to allow interviewees, as far as possible, to say what they actually think and not to inhibit them or guide them to certain specific answers. (Oppenheim (1992); Cohen et al. (2007)). Thus, to a certain extent, it was necessary to avoid leading questions, especially in the early stages of an interview whilst attitudes became established – part of what Kvale characterises as the exercise of 'deliberate naivete' and openness on the part of the interviewer (p.30). As he also points out, however, an undue concern about leading questions 'may be due to a naïve empiricism' (p.159) and in fact more or less leading questions sometimes enhanced the interviews, especially once the initial terms of the discussion had been established. In fact, of course, whether interviewees say what they actually think or what they think you want to hear is dependent on a wide variety of factors, including the wording of questions, but also the social setting and power relationships, which are

[99] Wengraf (p.64) speaks of the need to 'learn the language of the interviewee'- their idiolect or personal discursive practices.

difficult if not impossible to control[100]. In many ways, these factors seemed greatly more significant in the student interviews than in the lecturer interviews, since the lecturers were naturally more aware of the theoretical and political implications of the interviews. Nevertheless, all of these would need to be taken into account in the analysis and interpretation of the data. As Kvale comments, the validity of interview data relies to a great extent on the quality and thoughtfulness of the interview design, conduct and analysis: 'there cannot be one objective validation' (p. 251).

Interviewing the students

As I have already suggested, power relationships in this project played themselves out in a number of ways, and were undoubtedly, to some extent, a factor in determining the nature of the dialogue in the interviews. Interviews with the focus group took place in a seminar room two or three times each term for an hour prior to the module session. Whereas interviews with lecturers took place on their home ground (their offices), focus group interviews and individual interviews with students took place on more neutral territory, which, however, I, as researcher and moderator, controlled. In these cases, it was necessary for me to book a suitable space, and to arrive early in order to set it out appropriately and ensure that everything was ready in time. It was I who would welcome the students to the room and control the start and finish of the interview. In other words, I behaved very much in the teacher role which the students in any case associated me with as they knew that I was a secondary school English teacher. There is no doubt that, as in any interview, the relative roles we adopted in the interviews, as a result of our relative statuses and the social setting, affected the nature and content of the discourse (Wengraf (2001); Kvale (1996)).

On the other hand, they were in control in another sense, as I was reliant on their attendance at the interviews, and they were free to attend or not as they chose. As it happened, attendance at the sessions was very good, and students clearly enjoyed them and found them useful. Perhaps part of the reason for this was that these interviews probably provided for these students the nearest approximation to an A Level–style learning situation that they would have encountered at university, with their small group size, their relative informality, and their relatively leisurely and

[100] Kvale (p.35) comments that, inevitably, 'the interviewer and the subject act in relation to each other and reciprocally influence each other.'

student-centred discussion.[101] I used these interviews predominantly to find out about students' responses and attitudes to what they had experienced on the course, and this was clearly something that they were interested in talking about it. We sat around a table, with a tape recorder positioned in the middle. Each session began with discussion of recent seminars, lectures and coursework. I started the questioning at a general level, and, using the schedule as a guide, tried to allow the students to develop their responses whilst guiding them to make specific links with wider or related issues. The students seemed to enjoy the opportunity to reflect on the course, and the sessions enabled me to follow the way their responses developed over time. As time went on, I was also able to devote more time to exploration of related conceptual issues, as they had established a set of ideas about and responses to the course in the early sessions which did not need to be repeated at length, but rather developed or modified.

Questioning the students presented some challenges. As I have suggested, students were clearly less theoretically aware than lecturers,[102] so it was important for me not to inhibit their responses by directing them too explicitly towards my concerns. I wanted to coax information from them, as far as I could without biasing their answers. I tried, therefore – both in the interviews and in the information I gave them when introducing the research project[103] - not to be explicit about my concerns about the constitution of the subject at A Level or at university, but rather to elicit the students' views without expressing my own directly. This was important, I think, as my quite strong views about the potential problems at both levels would probably have surprised them, and would quite possibly have significantly affected their attitude to both the A level and the university courses. At times, however, in helping the students to construct a framework for thinking about what they were experiencing, it was necessary to make explicit suggestions about possible problems or areas of concern that teachers or students might have, and in any case, as the project went on, students

[101] Morgan (1998) comments that one of the advantages of group interviews is that they are 'friendly and respectful', providing 'an enjoyable set of interactions and a sense of being listened to.' (p. 59).
[102] Kvale writes: 'In professional interviews there is usually an asymmetry of power: the professional is in charge of the questioning of a more or less voluntary and naïve subject' (p.20).
[103] For instance, when introducing the project I took a relatively neutral stance, merely saying that I was investigating the transition between A Level and university English to find out what could be done to make it easier.

became more aware of the general trends of my questioning and I was able to give them a little more information about my specific interests. Nevertheless, it was essential that at no point did I express criticism of or serious concerns about their courses or their teachers/lecturers, and thus it was important to maintain a fairly non-committal stance throughout. (I also found it necessary to exercise scrupulous propriety when students made occasional negative or positive comments themselves about individual lecturers.)

I also had to think carefully about how to access the information I needed most effectively. Although an underlying part of my purpose was to assess what students knew about English Literature, and what they had learnt, I did not want them to feel that the interview was an assessment exercise, a test of what they knew or had understood. Rather, I asked questions exploring their feelings, evaluations or observations, or asking them to reflect on the purposes and methods of their teaching and learning, or challenging them to suggest reasons for certain elements of the course. From their responses, I would ask follow-up questions to engage them further in conceptual exploration, where appropriate. This way, whilst I may not have been able to tell whether they had grasped some of the 'micro' technical aspects of literary study, I was able to gauge something of the extent of their understanding of the broader and more conceptual 'macro' aspects.

I determined that there should be two interview points each term, and made arrangements with the students for new dates at the end of each interview, or arranged to email them. Generally, these arrangements worked well, but in the second half of the year, as students became busier and more confident, students were more inclined to forget to turn up, and I sometimes found that I was running smaller groups of three or four. I had in any case intended to interview students individually, in addition to the focus group interviews, but found that these smaller groups achieved many of the aims of the individual interviews, enabling me to explore individuals' attitudes in more detail and to follow up some previous discussions (Morgan (1997), p. 22). When students forgot to turn up, I arranged to see those who hadn't turned up either individually or in pairs in order to cover some of the ground they had missed, and thus used a range of larger and smaller group and individual interview situations to collect data. The dynamics of these different types of interview – complete focus group interviews, small group and pair interviews, and individual interviews – would

clearly need to be taken into account in the interpretation of data. Morgan argues (p.13) that there is no evidence that group interviews provide less valuable data than individual interviews, but that the context needs to be taken into account. As Morgan points out, group interviews provide access to different types of data from individual interviews, as they provide insight into group interaction in a way which individual interviews do not do, as the group situation establishes a different relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and as the content and conduct of the interviews are likely to be different given the contrasting natures of group discussion and dialogue.

In my interviews with students it was certainly clear that students sometimes spoke or behaved slightly differently depending on which grouping they were in, though there was certainly no substantial evidence that students were inhibited or otherwise seriously affected by either the larger, more public situations or the smaller, more private ones. As Morgan points out, however, there is a number of ways in which data might differ between group and individual interviews. The group situation is likely to yield more immediate data about the similarities and differences in group members' views, yet less depth about their individual views. Individual interviews puts more of a burden on the individuals to explain themselves, whilst group interviews perhaps put more of a burden on the interviewer to moderate. (p.10). On the other hand, group interviews can sometimes provide greater depth as a result of the more varied stimuli available to the participants (p.11), partly because they can 'reveal aspects of experiences and perspectives that would not be as accessible without group interaction' (p. 20). Group interviews may also 'produce a tendency towards conformity or polarisation' of views in comparison with the more private and perhaps nuanced individual interview (p.15). I also found that friendship groups were an issue. There were three distinct groupings (two pairs and a group of three) within the focus group, and smaller group interviews often happened in those groupings, providing a somewhat safer and more intimate discussion than in the larger groups.

My work with the focus group constituted an intervention in the way that these students experienced the course, although it was clearly not part of the course. Kvale (1996) speaks of the need for the interviews to be of positive benefit to the interviewees (p.36), and, in the first term, I sensed that they were quite useful for the students in establishing their own sense of direction and purpose in what they were

doing. After the first term, students approached the focus group with less intensity, and it had clearly become a less important aspect of the course for them. It is impossible to say to what extent the group made a difference to the students' experience of the course; I felt that it had a certain focusing effect on their work in the first term, but that it made little difference after that, as the students had clearly become very much part of the culture of the course and the university by then. The students themselves said that they felt that it had not made a substantial difference, but that it had been a very positive experience for them, providing a space for them to reflect freely on their learning in a way that they didn't have other opportunities for.

Interviewing the lecturers

The classes I attended were taught by a different lecturer each term, and thus I had the opportunity of interviewing three members of the department about their teaching. I interviewed each lecturer once or twice during the term, each time in their office using a small tape recorder. Again using a semi-structured interview schedule, I tried to allow each lecturer to reflect on their experience, whilst guiding them towards certain wider and related issues.

In these interviews, I positioned myself far more explicitly in relation to the issues I wanted to investigate than I had with the students. I began with the assumption that there would, to a considerable extent, be a shared understanding, between interviewer and interviewee, of the problematic nature of the gap between A Level English and university. These interviews therefore contained more genuine dialogue than with the students. On the other hand, I had to take into account the lecturers' feelings in questioning them about their own pedagogy and the way they dealt with the students, and I am certain that they exercised circumspection in talking to me about A Level teaching, so again our relative statuses were a significant factor in determining the content of the interview. In a complete reversal of the situation in the student interviews, I found myself in a position of relative disciplinary ignorance in relation to English Literature in these interviews, and am certain that my interviewees were having to gauge the appropriate level at which to discuss disciplinary content, theory and politics with me, just as I had to prepare my questions carefully so as to appear satisfactorily in control of a reasonable level of subject knowledge and understanding of the environment of a university English department. The setting of these interviews – the lecturers' own offices in their own university – as well as their superior status in

the higher education hierarchy also meant that, to a certain extent, they exercised greater control over the event than I did, in contrast with the student interviews.

Nevertheless, all seemed to find the interviews very interesting and worthwhile, and all stated categorically that the interviews provided a rare and valuable opportunity to discuss what they thought of as an extremely important topic with someone (i.e. myself as both researcher and teacher) who was able to give them food for thought. Indeed, the interviews seemed to constitute a clear intervention in the lecturers' usual teaching routine, albeit perhaps not substantial. The interviews were focused on the question of students' progression from A Level, and the lecturers' strategies for dealing with this, and, to a certain extent, they clearly affected the way the lecturers thought about the seminars. I felt that this was only a minimal factor in the case of the first two lecturers. In the case of the third lecturer, there was a concern on her part to engage in reflective dialogue with me about how each session had gone: she made it clear that she was interested in my view of the students' responses to each seminar. Although this meant that she was, to a limited extent, adapting her approach to the seminars as a result of my intervention, this did seem to be a consequence of her already more flexible approach to the sessions. Even if my intervention meant that what I was seeing was a little different from what I might otherwise have seen, it was very interesting to see how she addressed the issues I had raised as the module progressed.

A final issue in relation to these interviews concerns the use of the tape recorder. I felt that using the tape recorder was successful in terms of providing the basis for an accurate transcript, and in terms of freeing me to engage in free-flowing discussion and attentive listening. However, as Reiss (1991) points out with regard to his research, for which he decided not to use a tape recorder, 'interviewees often made some of their most interesting remarks as I met them or at the end of the formal interview.' I found this to be true of my interviews with lecturers; indeed sometimes these remarks would turn into substantial conversations which were frustratingly not recorded. My solution was to try to jot down the main import of these conversations in my notebook as soon as I got home. Reiss also comments on the potentially inhibiting effect of the tape recorder, but I did not find this to be a problem, and felt that the level of engagement of interviewee and interviewer in almost all cases was sufficient to enable both to forget (almost) about the tape recorder.

Supplementary data: questionnaires

In addition to the main data from interviews and observations, I also collected a small amount of supplementary, supporting data in the form of responses to a two-part questionnaire for the seminar groups. The first part was a short-answer questionnaire, completed in five minutes in class, designed to give me a few basic facts about the students' education and social background. This information was intended partly to support my analysis of what I observed and discovered in the rest of the project, and partly to help me establish a balanced and representative focus group if possible. The second part of the questionnaire was more reflective, asking students to write in as much detail as they liked about their motivations and interests in studying English Literature. Again, this information was intended to provide support for the analysis of my observations. [104]

4. Analysing and presenting the data

Processing and analysing the data

The first stage of analysis of the data occurred during and immediately after each data-gathering event had taken place, and took the form of notes and memos in which I recorded my impressions not only of what I had observed but also of issues which had arisen. In the case of lectures and seminars, I made notes during the events, as I was in a purely observational role, whilst in the case of interviews I made notes after the events. In these notes, I interspersed records of what I observed with interpretations of and questions about what I had seen, which fulfilled the function of moving my thinking on about certain key issues, which in turn often then informed the development of subsequent observations and interviews.[105] I found these notes, as well as listening to recordings of whole data units, vital in keeping a sense of the lectures and seminars - and to a certain extent the interviews - as whole, structured events. There was certainly a need to keep a sense of balance between reading the data units as whole social events, and breaking them down into codeable fragments.

[104] These data were used to inform my early negotiations with the focus group, but played no further part in my analysis.

[105] Adler and Adler (1994) write that 'observational data gathering continues until researchers achieve theoretical saturation – that is, when the generic features of their new findings consistently replicate earlier ones.' (p.381)

The next step was to transcribe the data from interviews and seminars, using a set of straightforward transcription conventions. The relatively formal nature of all the situations I recorded, as well as the very articulate speech and orderly conduct of all involved, meant that my major focus was on *what* was said rather than *how* it was said; the non-verbal or visual aspects of events which can sometimes be troublingly absent when tape-recording were not major issues here, although I tried to record significant features of this kind in my notes. In seminars, there was in fact surprisingly little speech by students in a whole-class situation, and the inhibited nature of many of their responses meant that there was very little interruption, and very little variation in body language or gesture. Indeed, the most common problem was inaudibility when students mumbled or spoke very quietly, sometimes because of lack of confidence.

In the group interviews with students, discussion was lively but still very orderly. The positive attitude of the students meant that there was, again, little in the way of variation in body language, for instance, to remark. Here, however, I frequently had to note tone, interruptions and general sounds of laughter or agreement. As a result of my own attempts to keep the discussions lively and the students motivated, it was very noticeable that I made extremely frequent encouragement sounds while students were speaking (many repetitions of 'right' and 'yes' and general grunts of encouragement. There were so many of these whilst students were speaking that I decided it was impractical to record them in the transcriptions. The nature of the interviews with the lecturers was different in the sense that dialogue took place at a more sophisticated theoretical level. Thus, questions and answers tended to be much longer, and utterances more formal and complete than in the student interviews. Again, non-verbal and visual aspects were relatively insignificant.

In analysing the data, it was helpful to keep a clear sense of the connection between the research questions, and the pre-determined categories and questions with which I approached observations and interviews. These, then, also helped me to identify themes in the final data sets: Miles and Huberman (1994a) describe this process as 'anticipatory data reduction' (p. 24). However, the nature of the data was such that it was not susceptible to analysis by any straightforward grid or set of codes. The various different data sets each threw different but related light onto the complex of values and attitudes underlying the approaches of students and lecturers to the project of literary study. Some of these values and attitudes were expressed explicitly, especially

in interviews with lecturers, but in interviews with students, and in observations of lectures and seminars, a network of behaviours needed to be interpreted within and between whole events (i.e. lectures, seminars, interviews).

Values and attitudes were manifest not only in what lecturers and students said, but also, for instance, in the pedagogic choices made by lecturers, in the manner of students' responses, in the ways in which the content and structure of each event (be it interview, lecture or seminar) finally resolved as a result of the negotiation between the various agents in each, and so on. Thus, one main interpretive route relied on making sense of the dynamics of each event. The other relied on triangulating data in a number of different ways - identifying patterns of similarity and difference between events of the same type (e.g., different seminars) and events of different types (e.g., lectures, seminars and interviews).

Stake (1994) points out that 'triangulation serves … to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen' as well as 'verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation.' (p. 241). Such clarifications and verifications emerged partly by identifying emerging patterns of behaviour by both the lecturer and the students in, say, the weekly seminars led by the same lecturer, as well as in identifying similarities and differences between the second term seminars given by one lecturer and the third term seminars given by another. However, as well as identifying patterns within each distinctive type of data (student interviews, lecturer interviews, lecture observations and seminar observations), I was able to triangulate, for instance, by comparing different accounts of the same event or issue in different data sets. Although the data sets I collected were dense, not easily reducible, and highly localised, the process of triangulation enabled the gradual identification, testing and refining of key issues and hypotheses in the light of the data, moving towards general understandings from specific events and behaviours.

Presenting the data and analysis

The data collected during this project, though all focused in one sharply defined area, are nevertheless voluminous, consisting of notes on 27 hour-long lectures, notes on and recordings of 22 hour-long seminars, and recordings of 12 interview sessions, each lasting over one hour. For the purposes of presenting an account of my analysis of the data, it has been necessary to be selective. Certain key issues in teaching and learning

emerged during the course of the data collection and continued to recur, such that almost any substantial instance of the data could be used to discuss these central topics. There were, however, certain key points during the project when particular lectures or seminars, or the course of discussion in interviews, seemed to bring these issues into particularly sharp focus, and it is some of these points that I have chosen to use as the basis of my discussion in the next chapter. I support my discussion with extracts from the data.

The selection of these data should also be understood in relation to the longitudinal nature of the project. Whilst the term longitudinal might properly refer to the study of a group over more than one academic year, nevertheless this study might be seen as longitudinal in relation to other existing data in the field, since it involved repeated exposure to the group over one year in order to establish whether progress was made, and, if so, what kind of progress or lack of progress. The longitudinal nature of the project thus suggested particularly dynamic or significant moments in relation to such progress, and moments which were in certain significant ways typical of the course as a whole. Without the longitudinal element, it would have been impossible to ascertain this.

The nature of the key issues which came to dominate my readings of the data is strongly related to the interests with which I approached the research project, and which I used to formulate research questions; in other words, they are concerned with the way in which the theoretical underpinnings of the discipline manifest themselves in terms of the structure and content of the course, the way in which students and lecturers understand, respond to, and value the course, and the ways in which content and pedagogy are managed by lecturers in the course in the light of students' knowledge and attitudes. In particular, they are concerned with the tensions between dominant models of literary study at A Level and at university. The key points which I identified for analysis were, therefore, moments at which these tensions seemed most problematic. I have, however, in my discussion, attempted to place these moments in the context of a broader description of the course, in order to give a sense of how characteristic these were of the course as a whole.

In the discussions which follow in the next chapter, I adopt an essentially chronological narrative approach. I inevitably move, however, during the accounts, between presentation of the data, in the form of description, and analysis of the data, in the form of interpretation. At times, there is some blurring of the line between description and interpretation - I occasionally incorporate interpretive comments into my descriptions – but I have generally tried to delineate clearly through paragraph and section breaks, and through occasional discussion of the process of analysis, the points at which I move from description to interpretation. I also attempt to show how each stage of the data collection raised questions which informed each next stage of observation and analysis.

5. Validity and reliability

Ultimately, an analysis of qualitative data of this type must represent an interpretation; indeed, all acts of analysis, whether of quantitative or qualitative data are acts of interpretation (Silverman (2001), p, 332). In a research project such as this, which is concerned with the detailed readings of respondents' attitudes, values and beliefs, it is clear that the scope for a range of interpretations and approaches is considerable. Miles and Huberman (1994b) warn that 'we need to be watchful … about the multiple sources of analytic bias that can weaken or even invalidate our findings' (p. 263).

Bassey (1997) suggests that 'trustworthiness' is paramount in claiming validity in case study research as 'the qualitative nature of the study does not allow for simple repeatability or objective confirmation' (p. 75). Lincoln and Guba (1985) list 'three activities that increase the probability that credible findings will be produced' (p. 300) – 'prolonged engagement', 'persistent observation' and 'triangulation'. In this chapter as a whole I hope to have demonstrated the use of three main strategies to validate my analysis.

First, I have tried to show that the design, conduct and analysis of the project has been underpinned by a nuanced awareness of the factors which inevitably compromise objectivity. As Stake (1994) writes, 'the whole story exceeds anyone's knowing, anyone's telling' (p.240) – but I have aimed to be clear and explicit about my own identities, experiences, and attitudes, and my relationships with the subjects of my research, as well as the identities, experiences and attitudes of the subjects, and their relationships with me and each other.

Second, I have outlined a range of steps taken to ensure, as far as possible, authenticity of response from the subjects of my research, accuracy in my reporting and transcription of data events, an orderly approach to the discovery of categories and patterns in my data, and effective choices in locating the project, and sampling and selecting data, in order to achieve balance and representativeness. Stake (1995) emphasises the need for a nuanced and orderly approach when he writes that 'an ethic of caution is not contradictory to an ethic of interpretation' (p. 12).

Third, in opting for a multi-layered case study which offers considerable scope for data triangulation, I have suggested that I have been able to generalise from individual incidents in my data to wider issues. Yin (2003) characterises such triangulation as the result of 'converging lines of enquiry' (p 98) onto the same set of research questions, each question requiring data from different sources to answer it. Hammersley (1983, p. 199) warns that 'one should not adopt a naively optimistic view that the aggregation of data from different sources will unproblematically add up to produce a more complete picture.' However, Gorard (2004) writes that 'if triangulation means anything in social science terms, it is about complementarity and nothing at all to do with mutual validation' and that 'when we view an object from two perspectives we expect to find something new as a result' (p. 45).

In the next chapter, then, in line with my account of the rationale for the presentation of the data in the previous section, and in line with my account of the processes described above, I turn from methodological issues to an analysis of the various strands of data collected, such that that the various perspectives enlisted through this multi-layered case study approach will together illuminate the research questions in new ways. In the final chapter, I draw together these 'converging lines of enquiry' to present answers to the research questions, and explore the complexities of some of

the key issues emerging.

CHAPTER 6: DATA AND ANALYSIS

A LEVEL LITERATURE TO HE ENGLISH STUDIES: THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE

In this chapter, I give an account of the data I collected through observations and interviews, and discuss issues emerging from the data. The first section of this chapter focuses on my observations of lectures and seminars in the first year English Studies course (as well as some of the supporting material such as the course handbook); the second section focuses on my interviews with students and lecturers.

SECTION A: OBSERVATION OF LECTURES AND SEMINARS

Introduction

In this section, I give an analytical account, in chronological order, of my observations of the lectures and seminars which constituted the course. I conclude the section with a general discussion of issues arising from my observations of the course as a whole, informed by the preceding analysis of data from lectures and seminars.

Selection and presentation of data

In selecting data for this account, the major decision has been to concentrate mainly on data collected during the second module of the course, which took place in terms two and three of the three-term year. I give a brief account of the induction and first module (in term one) in order to sketch in the background and to show how certain patterns and expectations were established early in the course. However, data from the first module were less relevant on the whole, as this module was not centrally concerned with the detailed study and interpretation of literary texts or theory, but rather with narrower, technical aspects of literary language and textual structure.

Within the second module – consisting of fifteen lectures and seminars – I have chosen to focus here on one set of two consecutive weekly lectures and seminars from term two; that is, two lectures and two seminars in total. In the previous chapter, I

explained that certain key moments occurred during the course which seemed particularly to illustrate certain key issues underlying my observations, and that I selected data for presentation in this chapter from some of those key moments. I had the option of describing a number of such moments from widely dispersed parts of the course in a greater number of lectures and seminars, rather than in the small number of consecutive lectures and seminars on which I have chosen to base this discussion. In making this decision, there has inevitably been some element of arbitrariness, as not all the moments of each chosen lecture and seminar could be described as highly significant – and indeed it is certain that there are other lectures and seminars which I have *not* chosen but which equally contain moments of great significance. However, the chosen lectures and seminars seemed to encapsulate particularly well certain theoretical issues which were underlying events in all the lectures and seminars. Further, I felt it important to present analyses of fewer, but *complete*, sessions, rather than 'cherry-picking' a wider selection, since many of the events within a lecture or seminar make best sense when understood in the complete narrative of the session. In choosing to focus on a 'set' of consecutive weekly lectures and seminars, I also hoped to add to this sense of narrative by highlighting issues of progression and transition between events in the course.

The first year course

In their first year, all English Studies students, whether joint honours or single honours, attended only one English core module session each week, which consisted of two lectures and one 50-minute long seminar each week in Module One, 'Language, Literature and Discourse' (in the first term), and one lecture and one seminar each week in Module Two, 'Texts, Problems and Approaches' (a double module in the second and third terms). In addition to these core modules, students chose other modules, (usually one or two others each term up to a total of 8 or 9 modules), which might be indirectly related to English (e.g. a drama in practice module, or an introduction to texts of the European Renaissance or to European Modernism) or related to other subjects entirely. English students were recommended to take the related courses, and many did; however, the modules on offer were not necessarily run by members of the English staff, and were certainly not planned as a coherent introductory offer. The core modules were the only English modules offered in the first year.

By contrast, in the second and third years of the course, the core increases significantly. In their second year, single honours students go on to study English modules full-time: four historical core modules (Renaissance, Romantic, Victorian and Modern Literature) or three of the historical modules and a language and literature module. In the third year, students study a contemporary literature module and two or three special subject modules.

This general approach to an introductory year and to course structure immediately throws up some questions about effective approaches to transition on the part of the university. The relatively small amount of contact for students with the core subject at this point might perhaps be problematic – particularly in the light of the recognised disjunction between A Level and university English. On the other hand, the two broad introductory modules suggest 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.

1. Induction and first module (Term 1)

Induction

At a brief induction session at the beginning of the year, detailed information about the course was made available to the students in the form of the course handbook – a handbook to the entire three-year English course, handed to all students.[106] The course handbook, intended to act as a guide to the whole degree course, outlines the structure of the course, and the overall aims of the course, as well as giving advice about learning strategies. It introduces students to the first year of the course, 'Stage One', as follows:

> [Stage One] introduces you to 'literature' as a type of verbal activity which is continuous with yet in some respects distinct from all the other things people do with language. 'Literature' thus conceived is not so much a thing in its own right, but rather a set of distinctive practices and discourses. Literature is also a peculiarly pleasurable and powerful activity: it involves a material-aesthetic interest in the play of language and life itself. In order to explore these practices/discourses and peculiar pleasures and powers for yourself, there is a considerable emphasis on doing things with and to language, as well as analysing it. In this way you

[106] In addition, handbooks to the two modules were handed to students at the beginning of each module.

> experience and experiment with the category 'literature' as something in part made (by you) as well as given (by others).
>
> The first term of Stage One constitutes an introduction to a wide range of relatively short texts, and to ways of analysing and intervening in them. In the next two terms, you go on to explore and analyse related clusters of longer texts. Over the year, you will be introduced to a range of contemporary theoretical frameworks and critical approaches. These will help you formulate your own critical position and develop your own textual strategies.

It would be unwise to assume that starting undergraduates devote much time to poring over such details in the handbook, but these descriptions certainly flag up straight away some significant differences between traditional A Level literary study and what is on offer in this university course. The emphasis on a political approach ('recognise and challenge ways in which power relations … are constructed and perpetuated') is highly explicit and likely to be unfamiliar to A Level Literature students (though not perhaps to A Level Language students); and 'literature' is grouped equally with 'language' and 'culture,' signalling a very different emphasis from A Level. This introduction also raises the issue of 'the usefulness of different [critical] approaches,' and the notion of 'choosing modes of critical interpretation,' both concepts likely to be unfamiliar to many A Level students. Furthermore, the description of Stage One immediately confronts the idea of the canon and the definition of literature in terms ('a type of verbal activity', 'a set of distinctive practices and discourses', 'a material-aesthetic interest in the play of language and life') which are characteristic of the socio-cultural approaches of literary theory both in their neutral position in terms of cultural value judgement, and in their use of a particular critical lexis – both of which, again, are likely to be unfamiliar to A Level students.

The induction session also provided an opportunity for the Head of Department to talk to the whole cohort of students about the course. He briefly outlined the course structure, explaining that the first year course is intended to be a gradual introduction to university English Studies, and enumerated the differences between literary study at A Level and at university. These included the differences between school teachers and university teachers, and thus between the nature of students' study at both; the greater coverage of texts; and the need for greater independence in 'finding your own way through the subject', and the need 'to take your own position with regard to texts and topics, not just to rehearse your lecturers' views' (as opposed to A Level where 'you get ticks for covering certain facts.')

In introducing the first module, the Head of Department made it clear that poetry was at the heart of the module because they had found that students found it most difficult

to appreciate; indeed, he explicitly commented that he knew this would be unpopular with many students who did not like poetry. He explained that the focus would be on structure, language and grammar as well as interpretation, and warned that students' expectations of studying 'big texts' would not be satisfied till after Christmas. The second module, he explained, would be a 'basic course' in the history of literature and an introduction to literary theory, adding that although the module would be more familiar than the first in some ways, 'the texts will be treated in very different ways from the ones you are used to.'

Clearly, the lecturer was at pains to spell out the different expectations that students should have of the study of English at this level from those he assumed they would have been used to at A Level. These introductory comments also made it clear that this lecturer had a strong sense of what to expect from students who had done A Level English Literature: a strong focus on the detailed reading of 'big texts,' but a lack of focus on questions of structure, language, grammar, interpretation, history and theory, and a neglect of close reading skills, in particularly in relation to poetry. Underlying his comments seemed to be a view that A Level Literature was successful in engaging students in the fictive world of the 'big texts' (presumably novels and drama) but unsuccessful in engaging them with a broader set of more purely literary-linguistic questions which, for instance, might help them to engage with poetry more effectively, and with a broader set of literary-cultural questions which might help them to engage more effectively with historical and theoretical contexts. In summary, he seemed to be drawing a distinction between an A Level course concerned with reading fictions, and a university course concerned with studying literature.[107]

The first module (Term 1)

The first module in the first year was entitled 'Language, Literature, Discourse' and consisted of a study of basic sentence grammar, poetic form, and language variety, and the differences between spoken and written language. The content of this module was quite technical, although it worked its way towards broader applications in literary

[107] Student questions after this introduction were illuminating, and certainly provided support for his position. One student asked, 'After you've done the poetry course in module one, can you do the rest of the course without doing any more poetry?' Another asked 'Will we be guided through the language element as I've looked at the set grammar book and don't understand any of it?'

analysis by the end. The set texts for the module were the *English Studies Book* (Pope 1999), *Rediscover Grammar* (Crystal 1996) and the *Heinemann Book of Caribbean Poetry* (Macdonald and Brown 1992). Assessment was by means of a timed technical test in the fifth week, an oral commentary on a poem from the Caribbean anthology in the seventh week, followed by a written commentary on another in the ninth week.

The rationale behind this module was clear: 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 during the induction session – was intended to give them 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. In particular, the module represented a deliberate attempt to place literature, as a form, in the wider context of language – an admirable aim, particularly in the light of the sharp division of the subject into literature and language at A Level and the increasing need for prospective English teachers to be able to teach language as well as literature. The 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.

Discussion in the seminars tended to be focused on exercises relating to technical linguistic content. Thus, while the module deliberately steered away from the 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.

2. The second module (Terms 2 and 3)

i) Module overview

The second module was entitled 'Texts, Problems and Approaches', and was essentially 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 the centrally canonical to mainstream contemporary. The core set text was *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Rivkin and Ryan 1998). Readings from this anthology were interspersed with the 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). Assessment was by means of a close reading exercise towards the end of the second term, a critical essay on one set text towards the end of the second term, and a terminal closed-book examination requiring a critical commentary on a passage from one of the set texts and a synoptic critical essay.

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.

Whilst students might clearly be able to make use of the skills and knowledge gained in the first module in their work, and I had hoped that such connections would become clear, it was notable that there was very little sense of any connection between the work done in the first module and the work done in the second, with both modules adopting an altogether different style and conceptual framework. Connections could undoubtedly have been made explicitly, but they were not, either in the lectures or in the seminars I attended.

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. Whilst this gave students the opportunity to hear a valuable variety of different voices, it led to a somewhat fragmented approach, with lecturers rarely making explicit connections between the content of one week and the preceding or succeeding one, and thus on the whole failing to support students' learning by presenting a coherent narrative for the lecture course. (This is perhaps an inevitable function of the lecture series convention, but nevertheless a factor in determining the quality of teaching and learning.)

The *order* of the lecture topics contained a logic which at times made connections clear, however. Returning to the theme of the course induction session at the beginning of term one, 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.'

The logic of this was clear: 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.). Although a number of lecturers attempted to locate the set texts in a relevant theoretical context, this was not consistent. The selection of texts (see above) was perhaps designed to give students some comfort in an unfamiliar

theoretical landscape through its resemblance to a typical A Level programme. As at A Level, too, there was a historical spread of texts, but no attempt to set them chronologically or by genre in an overview of literary history, since the organising principle of the course was the development of literary theory rather than the development of literature. There must, however, be a question as to whether it is appropriate for 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 emphasis given to the latter at A Level.

Seminars

In this two-term module, I attended the seminars of one class which contained six of my focus group students. The seminar leader had taught the module for some years and had had a role in developing it. In the second term of the module, another lecturer took over the teaching of this group, as the original one unexpectedly had to stand in as Head of Department. This gave me the chance to see a further different approach. It also gave the students a chance to experience a new approach, although at the same time it perhaps led to a further reduction in course coherence.

Seminars in the second module were more dialogic than in the first module, as the subject matter shifted from matters of technical fact 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.

ii) Lectures and seminars in Weeks 7 and 8 of Term 2

This sequence of lectures and seminars took place in the middle of the module, at the end of Term 2. By this stage, the dynamics of the group, and the relationship between lecturer and students, had settled, and a sense of the direction of the module had developed. In the first six weeks of the module, the theoretical topics of (i) formalism, (ii) structuralism and (iii) cultural materialism had been covered, linked respectively with (i) close reading of a number of short poems, (ii) *The Waste Land*, and (iii) *Othello*. The pattern of reading a text and then applying a new theory to it was well established. Week Seven was devoted to Caryl Churchill's play *Cloud Nine*, linked in the following week with the topic of feminist criticism.

Week 7 lecture: Cloud Nine

The lecture on *Cloud Nine* was given by a lecturer whose specialism is theatre studies. The lecturer made it clear at the beginning that he would discuss the play both as theatre text ('a blueprint for action on the stage') and as a text of its time, ('feminist, socialist, and post-colonialist'). He began by outlining the background of the theatre group – Joint Stock – which created the play. He identified Joint Stock as one of a number of radical theatre groups which had grown up following the general social and cultural unrest of the late sixties, and thus located the challenging 'disruption of sexual identity' and the 'cross-racial themes' in the play as part of a wider challenge to social values through theatre. He moved on to outline the elements of stark theatricality in the play – use of songs and music, costume and characterisation, and the relationship between character and audience – implicitly contrasting it with a more realist style, and concluded by showing an extract from a BBC 'Omnibus' programme which consisted of an actor delivering one of the speeches from the play in costume.

The lecture was clearly structured, interesting, well-delivered, and on the whole accessible (despite a large number of passing references which students might have found difficult and were not explained – such as references to Max Stafford-Clark, Elgar's 'Enigma Variations', and the Theatre Licensing Act of 1968). The inclusion of a filmed extract from the play was no doubt particularly useful for students, most of

whom were likely to have needed some aid to imagining what this style of avant-garde drama might actually look like in performance.

And yet, as teacher-observer, I was acutely aware that there were a number of levels at which this lecture might have posed difficulties for students. First, the lecturers' discourse was very much one of theatre studies rather than literary study, and he seemed to adopt the position of a theatre-goer or theatre-lover - for instance, opening the lecture with a quotation from a book by the director Dominic Dromgoole, and quite frequently using language and references pertaining to the theatre with which many students would be unfamiliar from their literary study of drama. I found myself reflecting on the fact that conventional literary study, as for instance at A Level, does not readily offer students an understanding or experience of the primary consumption and production of drama - the relationship between 'plays' as embodied in script-books, and the people, processes and institutions which breathe life into them; nor does it offer them an insight into the socio-cultural practices of theatre-going, theatre-loving and acting which many of them would be unfamiliar with from personal experience, except for the occasional theatre trip organised by their schools, or foray into a school play.

Second, for many, if not most, students this play was quite likely to have been the first 'avant-garde' play they had encountered. The sexual content of the play was very frank at times in a way that most students are unlikely to have encountered in 'Literature' before, and the avant-garde dramatic techniques are likely to have seemed surprising, unfamiliar, and perhaps even slightly shocking to the students – even those few who might have encountered occasionally-studied, mildly avant-garde A Level plays such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. (Indeed, at least one student in the seminar that followed expressed the view that she had found the play 'shocking'.)

Given this, although the lecture was in many ways good, I felt uncomfortable on behalf of the students; I felt that, somehow, someone owed it to them to sketch in some of these contexts more explicitly, and help them to examine some of their assumptions about drama from first principles. Although the lecture was in many ways accessible, there nevertheless seemed to be an underlying set of assumptions on the part of the

lecturer about the students' existing knowledge and cultural values and experiences. In my notes, I wrote, reflecting on a general feeling about the course so far:

> There is a constant sense of these students walking into a world that they are not part of, where there is something going on that they are not party to, but which they're trying to understand without anyone ever really explaining it to them.

Week 7 seminar: Cloud Nine

The lecturer began the seminar by explaining that she would not be dealing with the play in a performance-centred way, in contrast with the lecture which students had just heard, but rather as a literary text. In fact, the seminar 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 avant-garde drama of this sort, and with some of the complex issues raised by the play, it is 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.[108]

In this seminar, following a brief introduction linking the session with the preceding lecture, she 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:

L	OK let's stop now and get some feedback. Anyone want to volunteer, to get us going….? OK can I pick on you two?
S1 (Carrie)	[*inaudible…*] I found it quite shocking as I've not read much stuff like that before.
L	So you did find it shocking?
S1	[*inaudible…]* but I found that as a reader, it made me empathise more with feminism it also made me realise things about feminism that I hadn't realised before…
L	Could you elaborate – give on example?
S1	At the end in Betty's speech, which we just watched, the whole speech reflects things that every woman – not literally but like metaphorically – experiences and women in general experience, like women throughout history, like going from oppression to liberation, both sexual and intellectual, and the effects of that – the guilt that she feels, the sadness that she feels - it was things like that, so things that I'd already thought about but it made me look at them in a different way.

[108] In fact, there had been more of an attempt to engage students at an appropriate level in the first few weeks of the module, when the topic was formalism. As the theories became more complex and remote from A Level modes, however, so the level of questioning rapidly became more abstract, and the lecturer appeared to lose sight of the students' needs.

L From that point of view, are you saying that it was a consciousness-raising play – that it raised your consciousness and alerted you to… OK… You're nodding too (S2)

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. Further, although this particular text, with its explicit authorial messages about gender and sexuality, might appear to be a suitable text with which to raise the issue of authorial intention, it is not altogether clear that it might not have been better to raise it through a text with less clear authorial motivation.

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 questions 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 these 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, 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 beginning. Thus students' avenues into this issue have effectively been closed off.

In terms of 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 there is little sense at A Level of a purpose for criticism beyond pleasing the examiners, or of literary study as anything other than certificated reading.

Week 8 lecture: Feminism

The lecture on feminism, given by a female English lecturer familiar to students as one of the module co-ordinators of the first module, was again a clear, well-delivered and in many ways accessible lecture. The lecturer began with a short introduction in which she explained, valuably given the likely existing knowledge of students, that some of the underlying theories of the module - feminism, Marxism and post-colonialism – were to be understood primarily as moral and political movements rather than as literary theories. She went on to define feminism briefly and accessibly as a movement to replace patriarchy (which she defined clearly for students) with something more equitable. From this reassuring start, she went on to considerably more complex matters – a discussion of two different schools of feminist thought, which she described as the 'liberal Anglo-American' and the 'French' schools. Within each, she made a clear attempt to show how the socio-political thrust of feminism translated into an approach to literary criticism. She concluded by briefly sketching different types of feminist reading of two of the set texts already covered by the students – *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Waste Land.* Along the way, students were introduced to a range of terms and concepts, such as 'gynocriticism', 'feminist critique', 'phallocentrism', and 'ecriture feminine'.

This lecturer was clearly sensitive to the potential difficulty for students in grasping so many concepts, some complex ones. The structure of the lecture was extremely clear, and she attempted to deal with possible difficulties by making theoretical connections clear and spelling out the meaning of key concepts and words which were likely to be unfamiliar. Yet the attempt to introduce two different schools of feminism struck me as being somewhat redundant for these students, many of whom may never formally

have discussed or studied the idea of feminism or its general implications, let alone its specific literary implications. In doing so, the lecturer may well have been – commendably – attempting to provide some mediation for the feminist essays in the literary theory anthology which had been set as readings; but this, then, only served to highlight the inappropriate level of these essays.

This lecturer was alert to the probable knowledge base of the students, and she showed this particularly at the start of the lecture when she made some brief general comments about the relationship between political movements and literary theory – or rather she simply pointed out that such a relationship existed. As with the moment in the previous week's seminar when the lecturer asked students what they did when they analysed a text, it struck me at this point that this was one of the first times in the module when any lecturer had moved towards dealing explicitly with ideas about the nature, purpose and value of literary theory, or indeed of literary criticism – a meta-cognitive approach to the module content. Until now – although the module leader had, at the beginning of the first lecture, spoken briefly and in the abstract about the importance of examining how we make meaning – it had simply been assumed that students would understand where theory came from and that theory was important, and would get on with the task of studying it. Although this lecturer moved momentarily towards a position where these ideas might have been made explicit, the set agenda for the week – the readings on feminism – meant that she quickly had to move away again.

Week 8 seminar: Feminism

In the seminar, after a short introductory talk to the students giving feedback on their essays and covering some administration, the lecturer turned to the topic of feminism, beginning by suggesting that they might consider the week's pre-set readings from the literary theory anthology and then perhaps return to the Caryl Churchill play from the previous week, the implication being that there would be an opportunity to relate the theory to the drama. (As a notional plan, this seemed sensible, enabling students to create links between the previous week's work and this week's.)

> What I'm very interested to do – because you have read the essay by Cixous – and when I was preparing them, some of the central propositions seemed to be […] the idea of binary oppositions and the way that culture provides certain concepts that kind of construct gender. Really what I wanted to do was to ask you

> in your reading which of the essays you found most effective and which one you – I think we could just focus on one or two of the essays - so can I ask just for general – which essays did you find the most rewarding – or the most difficult, even – to read?
>
> *Silence*
>
> Any volunteers?
>
> *Silence*
>
> OK, Start the other way round. Have you all read the essays? I know you've all been working on coursework…

Following this, the lecturer attempted to ascertain exactly who had read the essays by a show of hands. Only three or four students had done so. The lecturer attempted to defuse the rather tense atmosphere by making light of this, and congratulating those who had done the reading, and then quickly suggesting that the class should concentrate on discussing just one of the readings – a short one by Cixous - in the seminar. She then ascertained that not many of the students had brought with them their copies of the anthology, so she made another quick decision to go and photocopy the essay. Before leaving to do the photocopying, she ascertained that they had looked at the idea of binary oppositions in the lecture, and explained:

> So you kind of covered that. I still think it would be useful to look at it, because she [Cixous] kind of extends it… into the fields of politics and the politics of representation, yeah? So feminism in a way – the feminism that you've encountered today – well, that you would have encountered if you'd read the essays – would have been quite politicised writing, saying well look, we are feminist and it's political – it isn't just a gender-based analysis, because I think we're looking at feminism today, not just specifically a gender-based analysis which doesn't necessarily have to be motivated by a political orientation with a capital P.

She then asked the students to read the first two pages of the essay while she was away photocopying (presumably sharing copies of the essay where necessary in the meantime). On her return, she handed out extra copies, and resumed the seminar as follows:

> Can I just start by asking you… how far have you got in the reading? Have you got down to the bit about bisexuality? [*One student says yes].* Yeah, OK. I just want to start a general discussion. Do you feel – do you agree with what she's saying about symbolic systems here?
>
> *Silence*

Let's start with the middle of the first set of binary oppositions she's given us…

Silence

Do you agree with the sorts of columns she's got? Do you agree with those distinctions?

One or two students made tentative contributions at this point, but the lecturer decided to make the question more concrete, referring specifically to Cixous' list of gender-based binary oppositions:

L OK. Do you feel that consistently down the left hand side we have terms that are masculine, or seem masculine?

Pause

S6 (Matt) Yes, I think it's kind of difficult because you might associate them with – I don't know – you might sort of say that's not right because it's associated with sex not gender, you know what I mean? Not every man might act in that way, but that might be because their gender is different … or is that…?

Although this was a straightforward question, and the student (Matt, who was often the only person to speak in discussion) gave an interesting answer, at this point she perhaps sensed (as she had done the previous week) that the students were now feeling too inhibited to open discussion. She also perhaps wished to go back a step rather than to engage with Matt's complex point. Thus, she almost immediately decided to change the nature of the activity:

L Actually, let's – maybe we should do something else, which is, could you complete five more binary oppositions, that are male on the left hand side and female on the right? Either in terms of colour, animals, behavioural characteristics, um… genres, anything that comes to your head… and they can be as playful as you like as long as you feel they are seriously oppositional.

(Students work quietly for three minutes. L chats to some students)

L OK, Emily?
S4 (Lizzie) OK, Blue and Pink
L OK great. Which is which?
S Blue for boys, pink for girls.

From here, there followed a basic but lively discussion about the way we assign gender characteristics to certain words in language and to certain objects and activities in society. The lecturer went round the group inviting them to nominate pairs of concepts and discuss whether there was agreement on the genderedness of the

concepts. This led to some relatively uninhibited discussion, with students breaking out at several points into 'chat' about the comparative behaviours of men and women – but it also saw a number of students attempting to engage with the issues on a more theoretical level, prompted by the lecturers' attempts to draw discussion back to that level:

L Given what we've just been talking about, if I were to say black, white; dark, night – other ones that we've encountered over the last few weeks, hard, soft – can you see them in gender terms quite easily? Are our positions always gendered? One masculine, one feminine?…

Silence

S8 (Mary) You have to take it away from people you know – do you know what I mean? You have to remove it, like an intellectual exercise.
L Can you explain more?
S8 Well if you said cold – warm, I would automatically say yeah – male, female, but I couldn't necessarily relate that to people I know.
L OK – so you mean it's abstract, conceptual.
S8 Yes
L OK – round the room. can I just ask someone else to have a go at that question? Are our positions always gendered?
S3 I don't think that day and night are gendered at all.

This series of events was significant in several ways. Although this was the fourth theory-focused seminar of the module, this was the first time that the lecturer had referred to the difficult set theory readings in more than a passing way, having tended to focus discussion each time on the general theoretical issue in relation to the literary text studied the previous week, rather than on the theory readings themselves. It was also the first time since early in the module that the lecturer had attempted to find out whether the students had done or understood the reading, or asked for their views on it. By this stage, students had perhaps relaxed their efforts on the theory readings, having assumed that they would not be directly challenged on whether they had read them: they were thus caught out in this case. Perhaps also some students had realised that the general theoretical discussion in the seminars did not necessarily require a detailed reading of all the set readings, and that they could get by with attendance at the lecture preceding the seminar. Perhaps also the fact that it was the last week of term, and students' efforts had fallen off, had an effect. Whatever the explanation for the students not having done the reading, this situation served to highlight the rather tenuous connection between the readings and the content of the seminar, the lack of mediation of the readings provided, and the lack of monitoring of the students'

coverage of, reaction to, feelings about and understanding of the readings until this point in the module.

It is also perhaps worth reflecting on the way the lecturer framed her initial question: "Which essays did you find the most rewarding – or the most difficult, even – to read?" Although this question does constitute an attempt to establish students' views, which has not been a frequent technique in these seminars, the question nevertheless embodies a set of assumptions. First of all, it assumes that students have done the readings – a fair assumption, although one which might have been more productive had the readings regularly been the central focus of discussion in the seminars. Second, it assumes a certain level of engagement with the essays and understanding of the underlying conceptual framework: it seems to suggest that students will be ready with lively comments on their thoughts about the essays, and that some will have found them 'rewarding' to read (although it also acknowledges that some may have found them 'difficult'). It is certainly possible that some of the students found them rewarding, although the evidence of the previous seven weeks might have suggested that only a small minority of the group were likely to have done so, and that all of the group would be in need of considerable assistance with the concepts at stake before being ready to engage in open discussion at this level. (It is noteworthy that the three students who *had* read all the essays were also the three students who had, throughout the module so far, been consistently engaged with the subject matter at a higher level than the others.)

Thus, despite the relatively open question she uses, the lecturer again, to a certain extent, begins the seminar by setting the agenda without adequate attention to the extent of difficulties they might have experienced. She is only diverted from this course by the discovery that they haven't in fact read the essays she wishes to discuss.

At this point, she indicates that she is scaling down her ambitions for the seminar, suggesting that she will focus on one essay rather than attempting a general discussion of all the essays. However, she goes on to set the terms of the new discussion in a highly theoretical way: she says that Cixous 'extends [the idea of binary oppositions] into the fields of politics and the politics of representation' and suggests that 'feminism … would have been quite politicised writing, saying well look, we are feminist and it's political, it isn't just a gender-based analysis… which doesn't necessarily have to be

motivated by a political orientation with a capital P.' Here, she has returned to the level of conceptual abstraction which characterised the previous week's seminar, and again it is likely that students do not have a clear enough grasp of the implications of the theory to make much sense of phrases like 'the politics of representation' or of 'a gender-based analysis …which doesn't necessarily have to be motivated by a political orientation with a capital P.' Not only does this seem to assume an understanding of the idea of feminism as an analysis of gender, but also a grasp of the idea that feminism might have political implications, and of the difference between politics with and without 'a capital P.' Beyond these, there is also an underlying assumption that students will recognise that feminism has something to do with the study of literature, and yet this particular connection is not likely to be obvious for these students: although the preceding lecture dealt with this issue by outlining briefly some feminist readings of the module set texts, this theoretical material is far more complex and its implications for literary interpretation less clear.

The lecturer then leads in to the discussion she envisages with a new question: "Do you agree with what she's saying about symbolic systems?" When this abstract formulation prompts silence, she rightly makes the proposition more concrete and asks students to comment on Cixous' list of binary oppositions. When this only prompts a couple of tentative answers, she goes on to make the question even more concrete, by asking whether students agree with the columns of the list of binary oppositions. At this point she is clearly scaling down her ambitions for the seminar even further, and suggests an activity that involves students engaging actively with Cixous' list by adding their own examples. After giving students a few minutes to work on this, she goes round the class collecting and inviting discussion on their ideas. She has perhaps realised that if the students are to engage at a meaningful level with Cixous' ideas, they need to begin with first principles and have an opportunity to express their own understandings of the social questions at the heart of the theory.

This activity prompts liberal and enjoyable discussion, and the lecturer does a good job of maintaining the good atmosphere whilst drawing students gently back towards basic theoretical questions. However, I couldn't help feeling that the level of discussion was in fact rather *too* basic and somewhat unfocused, and perhaps *under*-estimated what the students might be able to understand given adequate guidance and greater focus. Given the preciousness of restricted seminar time, it seemed to me that the issue of gender

stereotypes in language and culture could have been dealt with valuably but briefly at the beginning of the seminar session as an accessible starting point for an exploration of the relevance of feminist thinking to literary interpretation which itself could have been quite accessible for students. The discussion in the second half of this seminar seemed to indicate a growing awareness on the part of the lecturer of the need to engage students actively and at an appropriate level with theoretical ideas. Unfortunately – given the eventual lack of structure of the seminar – it did not ultimately lead to any substantial sense of elucidation of the broader issues which were at stake in this session, even though at the end of the seminar, the lecturer attempted to draw links between the discussion which had taken place and the broader theoretical issues:

> Now what I want you to take away from this seminar is […] what I want you to do is to think about whether oppositions etc., do have – are in a foundational sense gendered, but also the ways in which these essays – how they might develop your understanding of the terms you've been using so far […] So you can start thinking about all sorts of things – from form, to, sort of, colour systems in texts, and see what you feel about gender in those and what it adds to your analysis.

The implication here is that students have acquired another way of looking at texts which they can add to the palette of critical tools they already have, but this idea remains at the level of the abstract since students have had no experience of the way in which such theoretical ideas could be used in the context of literary analysis. Students may well have derived some benefit from this seminar as a result of the discussion in the second half, but the lecturers' approach still seems to suggest that she operates a set of assumptions about the students' abilities to apply this learning to a broader understanding of the nature and purpose of literary study.

iii) Term 3

At the beginning of the second term of this module, Term 3 of the course, the teaching of the seminar group was taken over by Harriet, another lecturer (as already explained), and this transition provided one of the most interesting moments in the course.

The students had read *Frankenstein* in preparation for the week's lecture and seminar. At the beginning of the seminar, after a quite difficult lecture given by another member

of the faculty about *Frankenstein* and intertextuality, Harriet asked the students to talk in pairs about their responses to the novel, or the lecture about the novel, and to be ready to feed back any responses to or thoughts or questions about it in a few minutes. This quite straightforward request generated more energy and excitement in the class than anything else in the whole module had yet done or would do. There was electricity in the air as, for the first time in the first year course, they realised that they had been asked to set the agenda for discussion, by starting from their own responses to a literary text – or a lecture on a literary text – without circumscription.

They talked animatedly and excitedly, and there was a strong sense of anticipation in the room as Harriet asked them, pair by pair, to say what they wanted to say. In the feedback session, several students who had said nothing in a whole class setting for two terms spoke for the first time. Several students commented on gender roles in the novel; one commented on what the book has to say about knowledge and learning; one suggested that the novel was tragic; another was interested in what the novel suggests about nature and nurture, two more in the oppression of and prejudice against the monster, another on the relationship between Shelley's life and her fiction.

Perhaps the most interesting response came from one male student, Colin, who had started the second module keen to engage in discussion and take on board new ideas, but who had quickly become visibly disaffected (or sometimes actually absent) in seminars. Given the opportunity to express their own response, he and his equally disaffected friend Derek (two of only four male students in the class) entered animatedly into discussion. Derek's question – in some ways a more conceptually difficult question than many of the other students' - was '*is the monster human?*' But even more interesting was Colin's question – the only one to address explicitly a meta-cognitive issue about the nature of literary criticism rather than a question about the fictional narrative or the life of the author: '*can all these different interpretations be 'true'?*' It might be observed that this is an extraordinary question for a student to be asking one term in to a two-term module on literary theory – but it was clearly heartfelt.

As Harriet took these comments from students, clearly gauging the intellectual environment as she did, she 'translated' them into critical concepts and wrote them on the board: 'the nature of humanity', 'social codes and structures', 'language acquisition', 'literary production', 'feminist critique', and so on. Once all the issues were up on the

board, she attempted to draw them together to show how a variety of responses could raise a variety of critical issues – authorial intention, textuality and intertextuality, genre, the production of meaning and so on. She concluded by suggesting that they should think about why the text is still felt to be important today, and whether the intentions of the author actually matter in their interpretations, and asked them if they knew why issues of oppression and alienation might have been particularly significant in at the end of the eighteenth century – a question which many seemed not to be able to answer, despite the previous lecturer dwelling for some time on the Romantic spirit and its relationship with the French Revolution.

This seminar was very heartening in some respects, demonstrating clearly that effective student engagement at an appropriate level in a seminar can quickly lead to coverage of a range of critical issues and questions in an atmosphere conducive to learning, as the seminar leader sensitively 'models' the use of critical language and concepts. At the same time, however, the lack of time available meant that these issues were left hanging in the air at the end of the seminar, and unfortunately were not returned to in future seminars. For the rest of the module, despite some valiant attempts on Harriet's part to reproduce this atmosphere through a greater emphasis on open discussion than in the previous term, the pre-determined curricular agenda of the next text and the next theory took over, and, as the module drew to a close and students focused on completing assessments, it was clear that this moment of potential would not easily be re-found.

iv) Emerging issues

Some of the most problematic aspects of the second module seemed to be 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. Throughout the module, ironically despite their apparent awareness of the nature of the gap between A Level and university English, lecturers seemed 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.

From my point of observation, judging from my own reactions as a teacher and the reactions of students in seminars, the root of these assumptions appeared to lie in the frequent lack of opportunity taken by lecturers 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 made a greater effort 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 agenda often seemed to be an agenda which was not 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 the agenda had not been shared with them, or they had not been given the opportunity to discuss the agenda; at other times, it was because the agenda made unjustified assumptions about their pre-existing knowledge.[109]

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. In many cases, whilst it would have been desirable for lecturers to show more awareness of this, I felt strongly that A Level Literature was at fault here, for failing to offer students an 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

[109] These generalisations seemed to apply to varying extents to the experience of the majority of the students in the seminar group and in my focus group, although two or three of the students in the class demonstrated greater interest, understanding and/or stamina than the others, In particular, the student Matt seemed to operate consistently at a higher intellectual and motivational level than the other students. The trajectory of individual students will be discussed further in the second part of this chapter.

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.[110]

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 – as I myself was as a student – 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 which I registered here 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, who, although never having formally studied literary theory, am 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 provides little in the way of precedent; indeed, many students (as my focus group demonstrated) go through an entire A Level Literature course without encountering literary criticism, never mind literary theory. 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 which was certainly problematic for students here was the relatively small amount of teaching time, and the relatively impersonal nature of the contact between lecturers and students, even in seminars. 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,

[110] My feelings here were not, in fact, only about A Level English Literature. There were several occasions when I had cause to reflect also on the failure of A Level as a *system* to provide an entitlement introduction for all students, regardless of their specific subject choices – in the form, perhaps of something akin to General Studies – to certain major social, cultural and political issues which bear on most intellectual pursuits: the major political movements (e.g. Marxism), the major socio-cultural movements (e.g feminism), and so on.

it is a necessary part of intellectual coming-of-age to become a more independent learner in which 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 defining more clearly ways in which, for instance, students of literature might learn transferable skills and knowledge in literary study which they might then apply more generally and independently to a range of texts and situations; A Level Literature, as experienced by many students, has a tendency to focus on the atomistic rather than the holistic, and this cannot help the situation. However, given this situation, 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, as I have already indicated above, 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 the seminars which immediately followed the lectures each week did not make any reference to the specific content of the preceding lecture. In most cases, the lecturer leading the seminar had not been present at the lecture, and so would have found it hard to make such links.

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 the time to establish exactly what students understood of it. 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 the students may have needed to discuss first. Often these seemed to me to be meta-cognitive questions, for instance, such as 'what are we actually trying to achieve in this course?' 'why are these texts and/or issues significant?', 'what is the purpose and/or significance of this discussion?', '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?'[111] However, my most frequently recurring thought during the observations was that what students needed, and had not been given an opportunity for, was 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. My notebook records numerous observations of this kind:

> A clear and accessible lecture, but even so it has missed out a vital stage somewhere: bringing students to a point where they understand why these kinds of issues are important. Wouldn't this be better done through textual analysis rather than before textual analysis. (Week 2 lecture)
>
> Students seem very uncertain about why they are doing this: unable to deal with the abstract concepts, Unable to deal with foregrounding of language and form issues. Can't see how these things determine readings…. How useful creative writing would be here! (Week 2 seminar)
>
> They need more infrastructure – more explicit laying of foundations for the kind of abstractions the course is based on, and a more basic overview of the scope and purpose of literary study and issues to do with literary value. (Focus group interview Week 4)
>
> There is a whole layer of knowledge / experience missing which is to do with understanding why people might want to look at texts like this[112], and an underlying question is to do with literary value. (Seminar Week 4)
>
> So often [L] pitches the seminar discourse too high so that students go away more confused. The tasks are too open. The discourse is too open. It all needs to be more structured and guided. (Seminar Week 6)
>
> There has been little, if any, attempt to discuss the course specifically in terms of its value, or even in terms of the university's expectations – e.g. we expect you to be interested in this for these reasons; these are possible reasons why this study might be of value or of interest, other than in getting you a degree. (Seminar Week 6)

[111] This issue also arose in lectures. Although, on the whole, the lectures were fairly responsive to the needs of the students, there were occasions when one could sense that students were not taking notes because they were waiting for the lecturer to 'let them in' on the agenda: they were waiting to find out precisely why the lecturer was saying these things and what their significance was. More successful lectures were explicit about their purpose, significance and structure.

[112] The ambiguity in the phrase 'to look at texts like this' prompts the thought that, although I originally meant it in the sense ' in this way', I also commented several times in my notes that I felt students also needed to consider why they studied texts 'like this' in the sense of 'of this kind.'

Thus, it seemed to be difficult for lecturers, in contrast with many A Level English teachers, to enter into the mindsets of their students. Lecturers often appeared to make noble but somewhat misguided assumptions about students' cultural values. At A Level, there has been a long-standing tendency for teachers to encourage enjoyment and appreciation of set texts as expressive and aesthetic objects, rather than as objects of socio-cultural study, 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 often arguably neglect the possibility of inspiring students with a more sociological approach to literary study which may not rely so heavily on the student's aesthetic valuing of the texts in question. Nevertheless, they tend to have considerable insight into the range of motivations and values which students bring to literary study – largely, of course, because of the potential in the A Level course for extensive personal contact and discussion between teachers and students. By contrast, the lecturers here often appeared surprised by the instrumental approach which many of their students adopt to their study, or by the reluctance of students 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.

SECTION B: INTERVIEWS WITH LECTURERS AND STUDENTS

Introduction

In this section, having – in the previous section – provided my own commentary on my observations of the business of the course, the lectures and seminars, I go on to examine the commentaries provided by the students and lecturers in my interviews with them. In the first part of the section, I discuss the interviews with students, and in the second I discuss the interviews with lecturers. I conclude each part with a discussion of emerging issues.

Selection and presentation of data

Throughout this section, I attempt to relate the data from the interviews with the data from my observations of the lectures and seminars, using them as a means of exploring and amplifying some of the issues underlying my observations. It should be recognised, however, that the interviews were not designed primarily to elicit students' and lecturers' comments about *specific* lectures and seminars – although such comments form a small part of the data. Rather, the interviews provide general reflections on the processes of teaching and learning in progress during the course. Thus, in exploring the issues I have raised through discussion of the lectures and seminars, I use data from a range of interviews in which the subject of discussion is often aspects of the course in general, rather than the specific instances I have previously discussed.

In selecting data from the interviews with the students in the focus group, I have here again taken data from the second term, again beginning with brief references to the first term. I have chosen to focus particularly on the individual interviews with two of the students in the focus group, rather than on larger group or pair discussions, although, in an introductory section, I summarise the background, experiences and trajectories of each of the students in the focus group. I selected the individual interviews because of the relative richness and detail of the material which it was not always possible to obtain in group interviews. I felt also that the significant contrast between the two students was helpfully representative of the range of experience within the group.

In selecting data from the interviews with the lecturers, I again chose to focus on the second term, using the two interviews I conducted with the second term seminar lecturer, whose seminars I discussed in the previous section. These interviews covered a wide range of issues and elicited a range of responses which were in many ways representative of the interviews I conducted with the other two lecturers. I also felt that a focus on the second term lecturer would be particularly illuminating in relation to the second term observation data which provided the focus for the first section of this chapter.

In setting out extracts from these lengthy interviews, I have occasionally chosen to make these extracts quite substantial in length in order to preserve the unfolding narrative of the interviews – for instance to show students 'working out' their responses through discussion – and to clarify the context of some of the remarks. In these cases, I have attempted to discuss the impact of the whole extract at the end of the extract.

1. Students

i) Focus Group overview

Introducing the students

The focus group initially consisted of eight students, all within the same class of twenty students. In the second term, when seminar groups were re-arranged, it was only possible to keep six of the students together in the newly configured classes. Nevertheless, one of the two other students continued to attend sessions, as she found them useful and interesting, so that the group came to be seven altogether. In the previous chapter, I outlined the method by which I selected the students for the focus group. Here I briefly set out data relating to the background and representativeness of the eight selected students.

In the class as a whole, sixteen out of twenty students were aged 20 or below and had come to university direct from school, or after a gap year; the remaining four students were mature students, whom I ruled out of the focus group.[113]

Of the sixteen eligible students, six were male and eight female; seven were aged 18, eight aged 19 and one aged 20. All were English and spoke English as a native language. Fifteen were white, and one was Asian. All the students came from the West Midlands or the South of England. Twelve were state-educated, of which seven had attended an 11-18 comprehensive school, four a sixth-form college and one a grammar school. Four were educated at independent schools. Only seven students had one or two parents who had attended university,[114] and were doctors, teachers or accountants. Parents of the remaining nine students were not educated at university and worked in business as managers, or clerical or manual workers. Thirteen of the students had studied English Literature at A Level, two had studied English Language, and one had studied the combined English Language and Literature. Two had achieved A grades, eight B grades, four C grades and two D grades in their A Level English subject. The overall grade profile of the students in all their A Level subjects was B or C, with many students achieving 3 Bs and many achieving 3 Cs. A small number of students (four) got a D grade in one of their subjects, and an even smaller number (two) got two A grades.

In summary, there was a considerable mix of social class in the group, although the group was overwhelmingly white and southern English. A typical student in the group would have achieved a B grade in A Level English Literature, and an overall grade profile of Bs and Cs, having dropped a fourth subject at AS Level. In these respects, the class was highly representative of the student body at the university. In the class as a whole, there were six male students and fourteen female students (as all four mature students were female); this was in line with the situation in the department as a whole. Also in the class as a whole, six students were reading English as a main subject in a Single Honours course, and the remaining fourteen students were reading English as

[113] I did, however, interview one of the mature students in order to gain a further perspective.
[114] In this figure, I include one student whose father was a high-ranking officer in the navy educated in a public school and other prestigious institutions.

one of two main subjects in a Joint Honours course – again, in line with the department as a whole.

The eight students who formed the focus group[115] were socially and academically fairly representative of the 16 students from whom they were taken, although as I pointed out in the previous chapter, their self-selecting nature must be borne in mind. Two were male, six female; all were white. Six were state-educated (four at comprehensives, one at a sixth form college, one at a grammar school) and two were independent school-educated. Three had one parent who was educated at university, while the others had none. Seven had studied English Literature, one had studied English Language. Two had achieved A grades in English (overall grades AAB, AAC), two B grades (BBC), two C grades (CCC, CCD), and two D grades (DCC, DEE). Three were taking Single Honours English (Debbie, Billy and Matt), the other five Joint Honours.[116]

The seven students naturally divided into three sub-groups (friendship groups) and it was in these three groups (or as individuals) that I interviewed students when not in the full focus group. In what follows, I attempt to give some sense of these seven students as individuals and as group members in the contexts of both the focus group and the wider seminar group.

Billy and Matt

Billy and Matt appeared an unlikely pair. Both had attended the sixth forms of 11-18 state schools, and both achieved B grades at A Level English Literature (with an overall grade profile of BBC) - but there the similarities ended.

Matt – whose mother was a teacher – was by far the most intellectually engaged of all the students in the seminar group (along with Carrie, perhaps, a very quiet female

[115] See Appendix for details of data relating to each student.

[116] It is notable that the two most highly-graded and the two most lowly-graded students opted to join the focus group, as well as three of the six who were studying English as part of a Single honours course. The focus group was in this sense not thoroughly representative in terms of the ratio of B and C graded students to A and D graded students; however, its ability *range* was representative. One of the low-graded students had overall grades of DEE; these low grades were apparently anomalous, and the lecturer could not account for her admission to the university. This student was the one who dropped out of the focus group at the end of the first term.

student who was not a member of the focus group.) Indeed, Matt and Carrie were the only two members of the seminar group who clearly and regularly showed in discussion that they were genuinely engaging on a relatively profound level with the theoretical principles and assumptions of the course.

Billy, on the other hand, quickly found himself intellectually out of his depth and frustrated, though his alliance with Matt enabled him to remain committed till the end of the module. On several occasions Billy expressed frustration with the highly theoretical approach adopted in the course, and made it clear that his interest lay in the physical and expressive - rather than the intellectual – experience of the texts, particularly through theatre, a particular interest of his.

Matt's thoughtfulness and intellectualism was in considerable contrast with the other three male students in the class, as was his appearance: he appeared to be cultivating a 'romantic intellectual' look, with flowing hair and a small beard in the manner of Che Guavara, in considerable contrast with the more mainstream male look (dishevelled, baseball caps, etc.) of Billy, and Colin and Derek, the other two male students in the seminar group. Initially, Colin and Derek shared Matt's positive approach to the course, noticeably indicating (unlike most other students in the group) in early seminar discussions that they wanted to be lively contributors and engage actively with ideas. However, Colin and Derek quickly became disillusioned by the course and struggled visibly to maintain their focus, concentration and commitment, whilst Matt appeared to thrive.[117]

Alison, Debbie and Lizzie

All three of these students were lively, articulate students: indeed, of the female students in the original seminar group, Alison and Lizzie were by far the most frequent and confident contributors in seminar discussion.[118] (Debbie was the one student who

[117] Interestingly, though, it transpired in discussion with the group's seminar tutor that Matt, like the other male students in the seminar group, was relatively weak at writing, unable to organise his thoughts on paper.

[118] It was notable that of the twelve female students in the seminar group, only five made regular contributions. In addition to Alison and Debbie, Carrie (a quiet student but the only female student who consistently showed a strong theoretical engagement with the course), Jane (an articulate and thoughtful mature student), and a fifth student who had not been in the first term seminars (who was also public school educated)

moved to another seminar group for the second module, so I am unable to comment on her performance in seminars.) Alison and Debbie were the two students in the focus group who had achieved A grades in English Literature and the highest overall grade profiles (AAB), whilst Lizzie achieved three C grades. Debbie and Lizzie were also the two students in the focus group who had attended public schools, and Alison was the one who had attended a sixth form college.

The fact that these were the three most positive and articulate female students in the seminar group was almost certainly a strong factor in their volunteering to join the focus group, and I needed to take this into account in evaluating their responses. Their positive attitudes came through strongly, though these positive attitudes did not always translate into a strong intellectual commitment to the course; it was sometimes necessary to work quite hard to get them to discuss certain underlying issues critically. I felt that the public school background of two of the students – and especially Lizzie (whose father was a high ranking officer in the Navy) - was a factor both in partially accounting for their very positive approaches and for their confidence. From occasional comments these two students made about their A Level teachers, it became clear that their experience of literature at A Level had been determined at least partly by almost-certainly Oxbridge educated English teachers with a strong emphasis on 'classic' texts, teachers who appeared to conform to the inspirational, romantic public-school model (as personified in *Dead Poet's Society*). Lizzie, in particular, displayed a confidence which at times appeared at odds with her intellectual level; both in focus group and seminar discussions, she seemed to know how to sound as though she knew what she was talking about and how to appear to have done a lot of thinking, as a result of a certain social and cultural confidence, rather than as a result of genuine intellectual endeavour: in fact, it often transpired that she had done significantly less work than the others and felt less certain about the content of the course. By contrast, Alison, who spoke less about the influence of her school and A Level teachers – (she attended a large state sixth form college) - seemed to have a confidence which was rooted firmly in a strong work ethic and striving for understanding and achievement.

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also contributed regularly. Most of the other seven female students rarely if ever contributed to discussion, though they appeared to remain committed to the seminars in terms of focus and concentration, and made some contribution to small group discussions.

Emily and Helen

Emily and Helen made for a sharp contrast with the other students in the focus group, and on the whole contributed less to the group. It was indicative that, after the first term focus group meetings, I did not get to talk to them either individually or in a small group until the end of the third term, and then only one, Emily, was able to attend. By contrast with Alison, Debbie and Lizzie, Emily and Helen had the lowest A Level grades in the focus group (a D and a C grade respectively in Literature, and overall grade profiles of CCD) and were lower in social and educational confidence, though nevertheless committed and keen to do well. It seemed likely that their participation in the focus group was motivated to some extent by their need for support. Again by contrast with Alison, Debbie and Lizzie, Emily and Helen had both attended the small sixth forms of 11-18 comprehensive schools.

Whilst Alison, Debbie and Lizzie remained confident throughout the course, Emily and Helen struggled to maintain focus and concentration, and by the end of the module had both decided to give English up: they were both Joint Honours students in English and Publishing. They became increasingly bewildered by the course content, although they continued to display polite commitment and keenness to do well. In this, they seemed similar in their approach to most of the other female students in the seminar group (apart from the four who regularly contributed to discussion), who appeared to suffer politely and diligently in silence.[119] It was notable, too, that Emily and Helen – largely as a result of difference in social class and educational background - 'performed' their femininity in a markedly different way from Alison, Debbie and Lizzie, appearing – through their bearing, dress, use of cosmetics, etc. – to conform more to mainstream female stereotypes. By contrast, there was something of an air of 'jolly hockey-sticks' about the other three.

Sarah

In addition to the seven students above, there was Sarah, who left the focus group after the first term, having transferred to another seminar group. She made few contributions to the group discussion. Sarah was one of a very few students on the

[119] This approach also interestingly contrasted with that of the two remaining males in the seminar group, Colin and Derek, who were so disaffected that they seemed almost to have lost the will to live by the end of the module, despite starting with a more positive approach than most in the seminar group.

course who had done English Language A Level rather than English Literature. She was also a weak student with unusually low A Level grades (DEE).

ii) Focus group discussion, Term 1

During the first term, I asked the students to reflect not only specifically on the first module, but also more generally on their experiences at A Level, on their developing understanding of English at university, and on the relationship between the two. The first session took place in week five, after the first lecture in which a lecturer had mentioned literary theory (although students would not be studying theory until the second module). At this point, I tried to ascertain how much they knew about literary theory:

Researcher	I want to ask one more question about the lecture last week. […] Now you said that you had grasped a lot of it better because of the context she put it in, but were there times during last week's lecture when you felt you weren't quite sure about what was going on?
Alison	The stuff about identity…
Lizzie	Some of the concepts…
Matt	I did Sociology so some of the ideas of self and so on were a bit easier for me to understand.
A	I was surprised because I expected it to be about metaphor but it was all about identity…
Emily	I don't know how they were really related – it suddenly came out of nowhere
A	Yeah
R	And even though she'd said what the lecture was about, and you were clear about that, there was still something you weren't quite…
A	It wasn't what I thought of as English…
R	She mentioned… she was the first lecturer to use phrases like 'theory' and 'post-structuralism' and 'psychoanalytic criticism' didn't she? What was going through your minds when she talked about those things?… (*laughter)*… Did you kind of understand the gist of things she was saying even though you weren't quite sure...?
Debbie	Yeah, from the context…
A	Bits of it I didn't understand, but…
R	And those concepts like 'psychoanalytic criticism' and 'literary theory' – were they concepts you've been introduced to at all?
D	I've heard them mentioned.
L	… I don't think I could explain them properly
Helen	We did something on different views…
R	So you looked at different types of criticism?
H	Sort of… very briefly
L	Actually, we did look at some critics and what they actually thought of … like we looked at Malcolm Bradbury, and one of our

	teachers was really into critics and used to photocopy masses and masses of essays people had written on books … but I don't know, is that what 'post-….'?
R	Well, it's related – different critics come from different angles with different perspectives, and sometimes they come from very theoretical perspectives, like psychoanalysis or post-structuralism.
L	Are there feminist ones too?
R	Yes
L	Yes, we had a list of these positions
M	As I say, I did Sociology at A Level, and I found that quite useful for English at the time as well, but now thinking back, a lot of it was along those lines – different critical views, because you have all these sociological theories from different perspectives, and it's useful to get into the habit of thinking that there are different interpretations of the same thing.
R	So you did that in Sociology but not in English?
M	Not as such, no. There were aspects of it, more simple aspects of it like feminist perspectives – I mean, because I did it in more depth in Sociology, that helped.
R	OK – two questions, then: was anybody else introduced to critics, did you read the work of any critics?
D	Yes, I think it was part of the syllabus… I can't remember what it was called… we had to do it…
R	So you did read the work of other critics as part of that?
E	I think we had to do it for *Othello*…
R	And you did it simply to discuss someone else's views of the play?
E	Yes
M	Thinking about it, we did a lot of alternative stuff in our A Level, we did women Romantic poets and we did Victorian poets, too, and I think it was all tied into that… different perspectives… there was the idea of how they were received at the time, and we did a thing a couple of weeks ago about the housemaid that wrote poetry, and we covered that too…
R	You mentioned the idea of Sociology being useful. Does anyone else feel that their other A Levels are coming in useful for the stuff you're doing now?
L	I think doing Philosophy was useful, and also Theatre Studies where we did a lot of stuff on Shakespeare.

The discussion here was useful for me in that it confirmed my intuitions about the students' existing knowledge-base in relation to literary criticism and literary theory, and thus strongly informed my reactions to what I observed in lectures and seminars. Students' comments here clearly show them working through a meta-cognitive process of attempting to understand the nature of the discipline, expressions of their emerging understanding that English at university is different in nature, rather than just content or level, to English at A Level.

Certainly, there is considerable evidence in this discussion that what students experienced at A Level was very different from what they were experiencing now. Earlier in the interview, when asked whether the English course was as she had

expected, one student had said: 'I thought it would be more like reading a book and writing essays on it.' It's also clear from students' comments that they may not have encountered much, if any, literary criticism, and that even if they had, they may not have been absolutely clear what it was for or what to do with it. Some students were also aware of the existence of literary theory, but only in the vaguest terms.

As in seminars and other interviews, one of the clearest and most positive voices in this discussion is that of Matt, who appears either to have a somewhat more concrete retrospective grasp of his experiences in A Level Literature, or to have had a more effective experience. Throughout the course Matt maintained a much stronger alertness to the nature and implications of theory than any other student in the seminar group. It appears from this account, and other comments that he made in interviews, that his A Level teacher may have employed content and techniques which were more in sympathy with the university model of literature – although even so, Matt is not completely clear about the nature of the experience. It is also possible, as he suggests, that he might have been transferring ideas from his Sociology A Level to his learning in English.

iii) Focus group interviews, Term 2

In the second and third terms, I attempted to focus previous ideas about reading and the nature of literary study on some discussion of the texts set in the second module, as well as to elicit general comments on the module. Students in the focus group reacted to this module in various ways, as demonstrated in separate small group and individual interviews during the module, After an initial full focus group meeting early in the second term, I interviewed Alison, Debbie and Lizzie (together), and Matt and Billy (separately) in the middle of the term; and near the end of the third term, I interviewed Matt and Billy (together), and Emily alone. Here I give an account of the individual interviews with Matt and Billy.

Matt and Billy

In the sixth week of the module, Billy, one of the less confident students, who – along with a significant number of other students in the class – rarely spoke in the seminar session, was clearly unhappy:

> Um, well, I just don't know where it's going, really – I'm just getting really confused with all the terms and stuff… I dunno – just, in the seminars when she sort of tells us to get in groups and stuff, I don't know what's really happening… in the first seminar I probably spoke more than I have in any of the others… but it's turned out to be – I mean, that's probably my fault, too – I mean I have been trying to do the reading, but because I find it quite tough, you read the first page and then the mind wanders… I don't understand why they expect us to read it because the terms and so on – it's just too complex, in my opinion.

He explains further why he finds the seminars problematic:

> It's like she asks us to do a certain things – no, I mean she asks us to look at something, but I don't know what she wants us to say … if there's a set question, I always find myself turning to somebody and saying well what are we actually meant to be looking for? […] she splits us into groups and expects us to have mind-blowing thoughts, and to me – well, the topic of discussion is a bit vague in my opinion.

I asked him what he felt the module was trying to achieve:

> B (Laugh) I have absolutely no idea at the moment! Well I guess it's to make you more aware of the theory behind literature.
> R Why?
> B To examine the texts further… I mean it's just more complex than A Level, isn't it? A Level was just, I mean you went in your class and analysed the texts and that was it, you never involved these concepts –and that's where I'm getting confused
> R I'm trying to think whether you feel you've been given an explanation for why you're doing it this way rather than more like the way you did it at A Level…
> B They haven't at all – I think we've just been thrown into this.

Elsewhere in his responses, Billy makes it clear that he has been attempting to get to grips with some of the theoretical concepts he has encountered, but he clearly lacks any kind of framework to help him understand why he is doing it, and is finding the level of abstraction too great to be able to access the theoretical discourse. Billy's reflection on A Level ('you went in your class and analysed the texts and that was it') strongly reflects the naturalised and unproblematised mode of reading which is dominant there.

By contrast, Matt, one of only two or three students in the class who appeared really to enjoy and feel confident with the course, showed that he had made considerable progress:

M I've definitely found it more interesting – and it seems odd because it's not exactly more accessible – it's almost more difficult –and I think a lot of people including myself are finding it difficult, putting aside all the things we've been taught to look for before, and applying these theories which are all fairly new to us, I think, but it's definitely been more interesting…

R Do you feel you're learning from this experience?

M Definitely, I mean I was aware of the concept of critical theories – that there were different ones, and how different ones can shed a light on a text – I learnt it from Sociology really, because that was much the same thing, and I think maybe that's helped me a bit…

R What would you say you are learning?

M I think … the idea that putting aside everything you've learnt before is much like putting aside the bias in a sort of editorial piece or journalistic piece, and perhaps it's that kind of thing that is the sub-text of the module… but I don't know…

R Right – so you can detect a sub-text […]

M Well you could argue that there might be one there, without reading too much into it.

R OK but what about the *text* of the module – is that not what you're describing as sub-text? […] It's interesting that you originally identified it as a sub-text.

M I think it's because you forget about the module title and so on, and the lectures and so on become more insular, until they all join up.

In other comments, he expressed confidence in grasping the main concepts of the theories and in coping with the readings, although he continued to repeat that he found it all difficult. He also reflects on A Level:

> Well, they did try to introduce the idea that there were other interpretations, but mainly it was just the idea that feminists disagreed with everything … but they definitely introduced the idea of different interpretations and different readings of texts, but it just wasn't a focus, I think. But as I've said before, doing Sociology, it just made the idea more obvious to me, especially in media modules where you looked at ways different things can be interpreted differently…

Matt's positive approach, and his ability to grasp concepts and reach towards broader understandings, is clear from his responses; nevertheless there is a sense that he is having to struggle to discover clear frameworks for his understanding, as demonstrated in his comment about finding a 'sub-text' in the course. As on previous occasions, Matt's telling comment on A Level is that Sociology, rather than English, prepared him for the theoretical aspects of this course, and in particular study of the media.

Having established Matt's and Billy's general feelings about the module, I moved to a discussion of *The Waste Land*, the first set text of the module (studied in week three). I was curious to know what the students had made of the text, given that many had probably never encountered poetry of its kind before, and they had had to read the

text completely independently. In particular, I was keen to find out what they felt they had learnt from or about the text in the context of this module, and if they were able to place it in a meaningful way in the framework of the course as a whole.

Billy had not dealt well with *The Waste Land:*

R […] OK. So tell me about *The Waste Land*. Have you done anything like The Waste Land before?
B No, it seemed really scattered and sort of confusing.
R What sort of poetry had you done at A Level?
B First world war poetry, which I enjoyed…
R So what did you think of what [the Head of Department] was saying in his lecture about Eliot having written *The Waste Land* shortly after the first world war poetry, but that it was obviously very different? Did you find that – his explanation of the relationship between the first world war poetry and what Eliot was writing interesting?
B To be honest, I didn't really think about it very much – I mean I do remember that he said it was written after the first world war, but I didn't really… I mean the thing was that with the first world war poetry, you knew what was going on because there was only one subject, whereas TS Eliot was writing from his head… you know what I mean … you could analyse the war poetry a lot easier…
R What do you mean by 'he was writing from his head'?
B I dunno really – I mean like Wilfred Owen wrote from what he saw, and what he believed this whole thing was, sort of, about… whereas TS Eliot's writing about his own thoughts, and subjects that it's harder to …
R Do you feel that you're expected to like the literature that's set?
B Um, yeah, to a certain extent, I suppose…
R Do you like it?
B Well, I didn't really get into *The Waste Land*… Othello I've always enjoyed, I thought it was a really good play… that's it – what else are we doing? Oh I've read a bit of *Frankenstein* which seemed quite good… but I've seen the film first
R And the first world war poetry that you did at A Level – you like that, did you?
B Yeah
R Can I ask you what 'liking literature' means to you? Does it mean that you would go away and read more of the same, or similar?
B I would read more of the first world war poetry. I wouldn't really go out of my way to do it, but if I was looking for a book in the library and I came across one, I might read a couple out of interest – but I wouldn't go out of my way…
R So, with a text like *The Waste Land*, I mean in the seminar, Julie [the lecturer] said something like that when she first read it, she thought it was really amazing and she'd never read anything like it, and she wanted to find out more about it, and really get into it…. Did you feel at all the same way about it?
B No – it didn't really strike me like that – but I don't know if I read the first few lines and found it a bit confusing and my brain sort of went, well that's not that interesting – I don't sort of get it…
R Do you feel –going back to the question of whether you're expected to like it …

B I just feel that they expect us to know it…As English uni students, they sort of expect us to understand it straight away…

It seems clear from this that Billy lacked a clear view of what he might learn from the text, and how he might learn it. This might be partially related to his lack of familiarity with this *type* of text, as well as his lack of familiarity with the text itself; certainly his comments suggest that he finds it easier to know what to do with more straightforward narrative or discursive texts. What he identifies as 'analysis' of these texts seems to be an account of the author's intentions or probable meanings (relatively accessible from a reading of Wilfred Owen, but not of T.S. Eliot) and he seems to have few resources for understanding textual production and interpretation in broader contexts. In asking about whether Billy liked the poetry, I was trying to approach his response to the text from a more aesthetic angle, in order to find out whether he could locate it in a different mode of reading, but his reluctance to engage with this question suggested that he might have difficulty in, for instance, seeing the ambiguity of the text as valuable or interesting in itself.

Matt, on the other hand, was highly receptive to the ambiguity of the poem, and understood that that might be part of its effect, and some of the implications for interpretation:

R How did you feel about *The Waste Land* as a literary text and what was your reaction to it, and the way you covered it as well?

M Um, I thought it was good that they didn't try and suggest any very specific ideas about it, that we weren't limited in our interpretation or told that we had to look at it in a certain way because it's so obscure really – it was interesting, but the things they focused on were different from the things I'd expected them to and perhaps the ones that struck me as more interesting, so I don't know if that was just because of differences in interpretation or what…

R Just thinking about the text as a text that you read, rather than a text to study in class, how did you feel about it?

M Well again it was just interesting really – you almost have to hold back when you're reading it so that you don't try and read too much into it, and go off in all sorts of fanciful ideas in all sorts of different directions – it's quite easy to do that, really. It was interesting reading the notes, too, and realising that they were quite obscure too, and reading it and thinking that maybe it wasn't meant to be interpreted in that sort of way at all. It just … interests me, makes you think.

R So you're drawing an opposition between reading something and reading things into it, and reading things just to see what effect it has on you… Do you think that's how it's meant to be read…? How is it meant to be read?

M I really wouldn't like to say… just because so many people disagree. I mean there's the idea of authorial intent, and then there not being any

intent, the intentional fallacy, so it just leaves it – you can't say either way. It's interesting that with the introduction of these theories we seem to understand less because nothing can be clear-cut.

R That's interesting. Did you like *The Waste Land*?

M I suppose so. I don't dislike it. I'm just trying to think of a situation in which I'd think to read it…

From here, I was able to engage him in a discussion about himself as reader and student in relation to the possible original audience for the poem, in an attempt to see to what extent he could conceptualise the various contexts of textual production and consumption:

R Is it something that could be enjoyable as a pure read, that you might just pick up and read it and enjoy it?

M I don't know – I don't think it's the sort of thing I'd read before bed, because you'd just sit there thinking, but what about that, what does he mean by that? - I suppose so, especially if you're in that kind of mood – you might even find solace in it!

R Do you think anyone read it for pleasure or enjoyment – I mean, who would have read it when it was originally written?

M I don't know – I suppose it could have embodied the spirit of the time, about the war and so on – disenchanted people, perhaps.

R So do you think it would have made more 'sense' to people reading at the time?

M Possibly – I mean maybe I'm just too optimistic – perhaps that adds several layers of obscurity to it, that we don't think the same way.

R OK, and going back to the question of who do you think would have read it?

M Um, specifically, I don't know – probably people who would have been revolutionaries if they'd lived in France in 1780 –

R What do you mean?

M Well, going back to disenchanted people, I think they must have felt that it was time for a regime change or something…

R OK, so you're saying that it potentially has a great deal of political significance?

M Possibly in that it's politicians that are responsible for the state of the affairs, and so if that's the state the world's in, it must be their fault. In that respect – I can't really think of anything which is specifically targeted but..

R So sticking with this question of who read it, you say possibly people with revolutionary ideas. Can you be a bit more specific about who might come across such a poem, what kind of people might come across or pick up such a poem, how they might be exposed to it?

M *(Pause).* It all depends on… what was the date… 20s / 30s … I can just imagine flappers running round… surely that would be the audience? The wealthy and educated, and in their social activities they were against the authorities of the time – it's not something I know a lot about though.

R What makes you feel that the people with access to it would be educated and wealthy?

M Just because that's traditionally been the audience of poetry and high culture – that's who it appeals to.

Matt comes across as intellectually curious and motivated. Here we can perhaps see him mobilising a set of areas of knowledge to apply to his thinking about *The Waste Land* – especially knowledge about history and politics (in particular, perhaps, ideas from the course on European revolutions which he was also following during this term); we have already seen Matt's ability to transfer understandings in this way, as well as his preparedness to take risks in discussion in seminars. His comments about the intentional fallacy suggest that he has also been doing some background reading beyond the set texts (and indeed he comments later in the interview that he has found *The English Studies Book* useful as an accessible source for the assimilation of some complex ideas, and that he has been referring to a literary dictionary at home.)

One of the main things that seems to distinguish Matt from the other students in the group is that he does not have a resistance to the abstract and the theoretical: although he is not finding it easy, he seems to have a grasp of the potential value of this type of study in intellectual terms which the other students do not have. The other students all, to some extent, harbour some resentment at being taken away from reading and discussion of the literary texts, or at least do not readily relate the theoretical discourse with the textual study. Matt, however, maintains a highly constructive approach, working hard to construct a framework for his learning from his experiences:

R Do you think the theories you've been studying this term can only be applied to good literary texts?

M I think they can only be applied to literary texts, texts that display literariness – that's an odd word – good, in that I think that they were amazingly ground-breaking or anything, I don't think so – in that lots of the theories use the concept of myths and folk tales and so on which aren't necessarily 'good' – a bit odd, written in the middle ages and so on…

R Can you explain why myths and folk tales have come up so many times as part of the discussions on literary theory?

M I think to reinforce the idea that here we have myths, and to reinforce the idea that the same myth pops up all around the world in different forms but actually it's the same idea, so it's not the story or what the characters do that matter, but the basic moral message, not the characters, but the essential meaning – that's I think the idea. […]

R What do you think of the reading in Rivkin and Ryan?

M It is quite dense, but I think even if you're reading along and it doesn't make much sense, I find that it formulates an idea in your head. I dunno – it takes me a while to fit it all together properly, but it's not too bad - though I do get confused when there's essentially the same idea being discussed by two different critics but then they're using different terms for the same things – like langue and parole, and sign and signifier, and that sort of thing, and you have to keep applying each to the other.

Matt shows clear evidence of having read and thought about these readings carefully, and attempted to place them in the context of the course as a whole. In thinking about Matt's responses, however, it's interesting to bear in mind his comments in the first term which suggested that his A Level teacher had covered some of the preparatory ground for this work.

iv) Emerging issues

Throughout the interviews with the students, I encountered plenty of evidence that they were attempting to deal with a range of classic problems encountered by first year undergraduates in the transition from school to university, which have been amply documented: adjusting to learning in the lecture and seminar situation, adjusting to a new type of relationship with teachers, balancing the demands of a heavy workload with the temptations and difficulties of a new independence of lifestyle away from home, finding ways of learning independently and managing time effectively, and so on. Yet beyond these universal factors, there was also evidence of a set of issues more specific to English as a discipline.

Although the students in the focus group reacted to the experience of the course in different ways, and were able to draw differently and with varying levels of efficiency and confidence on a range of resources – intellectual, pedagogical, etc – in coping with it, it is clear that the substantial differences in the content and theoretical frameworks of the subject English as practised at A Level and as practised at university posed considerable problems for all of them, especially given the second module lecturers' limited pedagogical expertise, and limited contact time with students. (Debbie, the student in the focus group who attended a different seminar group, clearly indicated that her seminar lecturer was more pedagogically expert than 'our' seminar lecturer, but the essential nature of the cognitive and meta-cognitive problem remained the same.)

The students confirmed in discussion that they felt that texts were being approached very differently here – not just because there was so little time to read them and discuss them in comparison with A Level, but because the nature of the responses

required was very different. Several students noted that there had been pressure from their A Level teachers to 'appreciate' their set texts in the sense that they felt their teachers wanted them to enjoy the reading of them and would be disappointed if they didn't like them. For this reason, their teachers set out to 'bring the texts to life' for them in various ways, if only through the extended discussion and group camaraderie afforded by the A Level course. There was confirmation, too, that textual analysis at A Level tended to focus on the 'softer' elements - character, themes and issue; and that teachers would guide students in detail through individual texts, providing historical and social context references in order to aid interpretation, largely unproblematised as an understanding of authorial intention. And there was confirmation that none of the students had encountered much or given much thought to criticism at A Level – some of the students not at all.

Here, by contrast, some of the students saw clearly that lecturers were adopting a more intellectual and less aesthetic approach in terms of textual value and analysis – although such meta-cognitive issues were never really made explicit in the course – and that what was required was that students should value and engage critically in the *study* of the text rather than in the text itself; and that the secondary (critical) text and activity had in some sense more value than the primary (literary) text. Even those who could see this, however, were not necessarily able to obtain a clear understanding of why the course was as it was, how they could succeed, or where this might be leading them. This was no doubt partly because of the difficulty of the set literary theory reader, partly because of the course design, and partly because of the limited pedagogical expertise of the lecturers – all of which most students commented on, more or less explicitly. It was also clear, however, that students' fundamental understanding of the nature and purpose of literary criticism – indeed of the kind of learning that might usefully emerge from their study – was vague. As a result, all the students apart perhaps from one, ended up - to a greater or lesser extent - adopting an instrumental approach to 'getting through' the module and producing what they felt was required for the final assignments, with little sense of real intellectual engagement with the course content. For some of the students, the module offered a great deal of confusion and frustration and virtually no enlightenment.

On a more macroscopic level, these problems seem clearly to highlight a very substantial lack of congruence between what A Level teachers do and what university

lecturers do. Students – whether they are to read English at university or not – are surely inadequately prepared at A Level if they have not been enabled to understand and question some of the essential purposes, problems, frameworks and contexts of literary criticism and literary study, or at least to understand that there might be different versions of these. On the other hand, lecturers' apparent lack of concrete awareness of – or lack of curricular or pedagogical adjustment to – the implications of this situation, and the mindsets and limitations of the students produced by it – and of the teachers and systems which produce it – is also surprising, especially given the particular nature of the intake – in terms of social background, grade profile, and intellectual capacity - at a university of this type.

With the possible exception of Matt and Carrie, indeed, one thing that emerged strongly from both my observations and from discussion with students was a certain lack of intellectual drive or ambition, or at least a lack of awareness of the intellectual purposes, implications and possibilities of their study. This does not come as a surprise to me as an A Level teacher, and it is doubtless true to varying extents of most university students; it was certainly true for me and my contemporaries at university, to some extent. The struggle to understand and broaden one's perceptions of the nature of learning and the boundaries of disciplines is doubtless an important element of learning itself, and these interviews provide plenty of evidence that the students – again, to varying extents – were engaging in this struggle to construct and understand frameworks for their learning. However, there is also evidence that students were struggling, and sometimes failing, to engage *effectively* in learning because of a lack of meta-cognitive support originating both in the failure of A Level English Literature to provide an adequate foundation in certain essential theoretical aspects of the subject, and in the tendency of lecturers to treat students as fully-fledged intellectuals already familiar with the purposes, methods and boundaries of the discipline – despite the acknowledged theoretical controversies and conflicts that have beset English for at least thirty years.

B. Lecturers

i) Introducing the lecturers

There were fifteen lecturers in the English department at the university, including some in the early years of their career and some who were very experienced. Nine of the fifteen were women. In all, I observed eleven of them lecturing. All three lecturers (one man, two women) whose seminars I attended, and whom I interviewed, were experienced and long-standing members of the department, all between the ages of approximately 35 and 55.

Richard, the lecturer in Term 1, is the most long-standing member of the department. Approachable, down-to-earth, rather paternal, he is popular with students and his teaching style is highly accessible. He is a specialist in English Language and Textual Studies, although he is equally at home with English Literature; he is jointly responsible for the design and conduct of the first module. He has published a number of influential text books on the teaching of English at HE, and is well known for his interest in pedagogy. His undergraduate degree in English was at a major redbrick university in Wales.

Julie, the second term lecturer, is also a long-standing member of the department. Lively, youthful, encouraging and extremely approachable, she is clearly liked by the students, although they do not always find her teaching style accessible. She is a literature specialist with particular interests in feminism and post-colonialism, and is jointly responsible for the design and conduct of the second module. Her undergraduate degree in English was at a well-known new university in the North of England (in the days when it was still a polytechnic).

Harriet, the third term lecturer, is yet another long-standing member of the department. Again, she is approachable, down-to-earth and encouraging, and students appear to like her and find her teaching style quite accessible – although, as she 'took over' the group at a late stage in the year, they did not get a chance to get to know her well. She is a professional poet with a strong interest in literary theory who teaches part-time at the university.

Here, I give an account of the two interviews I conducted with Julie, the second term lecturer.

ii) Interviews with Julie, Term 2 lecturer

I conducted two interviews with the second term lecturer, one in week six and one in week eight. In these interviews, I attempted to establish the lecturer's view of the progress of the module in terms of her teaching and students' learning, but also to establish her perceptions about a range of related issues – the experience of the students at A Level, the design of the course, and the constitution of the subject at university, for instance.

Throughout the term, the lecturer maintained a positive view of the class's learning, in particular in comparison with previous classes she had taken in this module. (She had been one of the module leaders for a number of years and centrally involved in its design.) At the same time, she is aware that there are problems with the module design:

> I think that my experience with other groups is that they have not read the theory, that they've looked at Rivkin and Ryan and they've read the first couple of essays and they've lost interest. We haven't been able to carry them. We know that it's not the right anthology but because we're re-designing all the courses, we ran with it, and because the students can buy them second-hand from the year before. We don't think it's sufficiently disastrous to ditch it, but we lose them with the theory. I think with this group – and it's very early to make these generalisations – I've got the impression that they're reading the theory – I mean, they are – but I haven't quite established what level they're at with the theory, because some students are making very good connections and are understanding the work well, the theory well – so I haven't quite worked that out -and as I've said to you before informally, I haven't had that sense of resistance, that's what I've had from early on with other seminar groups and it's just chemically bad in there! Whereas I just feel that they're willing, and I'm actually enjoying teaching this group more. And OK, there are times when, like that week when I kept on trying different things to get them to open up, but I think that was the first week when I felt that what I was doing wasn't quite working, but I felt also that I didn't think I was totally losing them.

Although she is relatively positive about this class's response, she is realistic that there are key problems not only with the cognitive level of the course, but also with meta-cognitive aspects:

> I think the way the course is set up, we're implicitly rather than explicitly saying 'theory helps you to open up literary texts', but I don't think we explain that, and I think even in the introductory sessions, they're more about housekeeping issues and the course itself rather than saying 'this is why we put this course together like this', which I know – I mean I do a course on travel writing, and I know I spend a

> lot of time in the first lecture saying this is why I've chosen these texts, this is the theoretical approach we're going to take and why. We don't do that and I think that on reflection, we're not doing it because *we* know what the course is about and we've lost sight of the fact that *they* don't. […] There's a long way to go, and when I say that my seminar group are with me, I still feel that they want to learn. I don't know at the end of it whether they will have fully understood why we want them to do these things. I think they're co-operating and they want that knowledge, but I don't think they know what it is they should gain.

In other parts of the interview, she reflects that the course tends to adopt a purist approach to theory which is not successful, and that the theoretical texts need more mediation if they are to be accessible to the students, although the course had been revised in order to accommodate more canonical literary texts 'so that they could feel more comfortable with the literary texts and therefore handle the theory.' When asked what seems to be the 'missing link', what might 'enable them to get more of a hold' on the course, she identifies the meta-cognitive need to 'make them feel that it is worthwhile':

> I think we need to make them feel that it is worthwhile. That with their final essay – what I would like to happen is that they either say to themselves 'I wouldn't have read this text in this way, or I wouldn't have understood what I was doing with this text…' That's what I want them to learn: 'I didn't understand that I was a critical reader, and that critical reading was informed by things. I now recognise that. So it's a process of self-reflexive learning. But also I would want them, to find certain theories exciting, so that they think 'I would never have read this text in that way without doing that.'

One of the main themes of the lecturer's comments is a perception that students are in some sense 'going through the motions' of the study – partly because the course has not enabled them to have a clear understanding of its purpose, and partly because the content is not accessible enough. As in the seminar mentioned earlier, she returns to the idea of students needing to 'do things' with texts in the name of 'critical reading', and, whilst it's clear that she understands that this concept might be problematic, it's not clear at this stage that she knows how this might be achieved in concrete terms, or exactly what the impediments to students' grasp of this concept might be.

Reflecting on her understanding of the students' experience at A Level, she attempts to locate possible causes of students' difficulties:

> R What are your perceptions of the kind of experience that the students you teach are coming with from A Level, assuming that most of them will have studied English Literature and a few may have done Language or Media?

L I think it varies, and I don't want to make assumptions […], but I think that if I have established any commonality it's largely to do with having experience of sticking with a text for a longer period and feeling that they should get to know it well, the literary text, so actually going one week then out, bang, in with another one, I think they find difficult, but I also feel that they want more guidance and I don't think they come to us wanting to be independent thinkers. I think those students that take up what I do and run with it, think what we just want them to do is personalised 'I feel this very strongly… '

R So you feel that personal response is what they feel you want…

L I think that's what they interpret independence to be, rather than informed…

R So what do you feel – you have an image of what independent thinking and learning is for them at this stage – can you say more about what that might look like and how that might be achieved so that they're in a better position when they get to university – or what it is about A Level that doesn't enable them to do that?

L It could be a whole range of things, from how they're taught to – I don't know how assessment driven A Level students are because they do tend to come to us focussing a lot on outcomes like the fact that they feel they've got to know only what they need to know to pass and pass well and I find that is increasingly the case and I find it very disappointing. I've even experienced students that very quickly start not coming to seminars and not reading things because they decide very early on what they want to focus on. That's a separate thing to your question about A Level, but I don't know whether the way they're assessed now at A Level is producing different types of students- I don't know very much about that – but I feel that if students can be encouraged to again think about the fact that you can't read literature in an unmediated way, that they've got to focus on what it is that they bring to a text and how they read it, and the fact that, without misreading things, there are – I wouldn't like to say multiple readings – but there are possibly different interpretations. And I would have thought, actually, that if you spend a lot of time with one literary text, then you could do that, and I'm sure that some students do do that, but I think a lot of others sort of want to be told what they can and can't say. I don't know whether that's just reverential, but I think they think well this is Dickens and my tutor knows more about Dickens than I'll ever know, and if she tells me that this is what, then I'm happy to – and I think they treat it rather empirically, and they do that with the lectures too - 'well he said in the lecture this, and this is what I want to reproduce in the exam.

R And does that relate to what you were saying about their natural –apparently natural – desire to respond personally; I mean is it not just that they think you know better, but also that they've picked up that that's not the way to respond?

L Possibly. I'm just trying to think of students that do this. There's no-one on the seminar group that we're working with, really, that's done this kind of personalised…

R There was a bit last week when they desperately wanted to talk about Desdemona and Othello and jealousy – and I've seen a video of another seminar at a different university where the students simply wouldn't budge from talking about the relationship between Kathy and Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* despite the tutor constantly guiding them towards different ways of discussing the novel other than through character and so on…

L Well that hits on something that I haven't said yet, which goes back to why we devise the course like this, which is that we found that – and I think

again this is my experience of how students read the novel at A Level – they come in thinking of general themes but they want to focus on character, and one of the reasons why we did formalism and structuralism, characters are functions, was to try to get them to… so from that point of view, you're right, that they actually didn't really want to talk about that. They want to read content. Some of them come through with issues now – they just want to raid literary texts for their issue-based content rather than characters, and it's actually emphasising the fact that they don't know what to do with literary language – that's what they don't come in with, and I don't know why, and that's of course why we give them the grammar and stylistics course, which they don't like very much for the same reason.

R So going back to the A Level question, you've identified that there's an emphasis on theme and character in the novel and a strong assessment-driven element which can be counter-productive. Can you identify anything else that A Level might be doing that isn't helpful or anything that A Level could do which would be helpful?

L Interesting. [*pause].* I'm just thinking about what we want to produce at the end of the three years, and how A Level could help to get us closer to that. I think one of the questions I raise last week – you know – why do you read literature, what do you think it is, and how does it function within the cultural sphere – what actually is it? - I don't think students come with that, and as I think I've said to you before, when I read UCAS forms, when they're writing about why they want to do Publishing or whatever, they think about it as a subject area with things they need to know, whereas with English it's 'I've always enjoyed reading books' – and I'll never want to take that pleasure from them, and I think I'm lucky to teach such a pleasurable subject – it's an important element – but, one, they don't theorise pleasure, and, two, they don't really come equipped with this thing about whether literature is a mode of knowledge and how does that way of thinking function and how historically has it functioned?

R So what do you think A Level might be able to do to equip them for that?

L I'd like students to step outside and almost – in an appropriate way – theorise the subject – ask what is thing called? I'm very conscious of the fact that at A Level they are thinking about what is English Studies, what is literature? – certainly some of them have been through those debates. That's very important, but I think it really is what kind of knowledge do you get?

R You talked about pleasure and the whole thing about loving literature and loving reading – can you say a bit more about how you see the difference between loving literature, books, reading on the one hand, and loving the study of literature on the other? Can you reflect more on the difference and how students might see it?

L I think there are two things – I guess I'd probably want to think that once they can understand the things you can do with a literary text, they might approach things they just have never enjoyed in a raw sense, and think 'well actually there's quite a lot I can get out of that that's rich, and I've got a different pleasure zone' – a more analytic one, but it's still there. I've sat in seminars where *students* have just said 'you've just destroyed this for me' and that I think is productive in a way, to get them to think about what it was they were holding on to that somehow they've now lost. I think I probably want to see them enjoy the analytical process because I do think it's intensely creative. It's not an empirical subject, and it's even not like history – though I know lots of very creative historians – cultural history can be very exciting.

R Do you think they understand why it might be necessary to do anything to literature other than enjoy it? Is part of the problem the fact that they

haven't understood that at a certain point the study of literature is not to do with the personal response you mentioned earlier?

L Yes, absolutely – because when a student doesn't know what to do, and you say to them 'well did you enjoy it?' they'll say something like they couldn't identify with it, so that sort of humanist liberal thing still seems to be very ideologically built-in, or it's been supported and not dismantled at A Level, but they can't really even see where that comes from.

One particularly interesting thing about this sequence is the way in which the lecturer, by reflecting on what A Level *doesn't* do, arrives at a considerably more concrete expression of the problems which students might be experiencing at university than she had previously. She identifies the need for students to be introduced to multiple readings as part of a supported and extended study of individual texts (in contrast with what she describes as the 'one week then out, bang, in with another one' approach of this module). She identifies the prevalence amongst students of a certain mode of liberal humanist reading, which emphasises engagement with the fictive world of the texts, rather than broader questions of context: interpretation, form, language, social context. She identifies the need for students to engage with a set of essential questions about the purpose and nature of literature and literary study, and the differences between the pleasures and purposes of reading and of literary study. She identifies the inhibiting relationship between assessment and genuine learning. She also identifies a problem relating to the nature of and ownership of knowledge and interpretations in English, in particular the nature of the relationship between teacher and student knowledge and interpretations.

These are themes which resonate strongly with my observations of seminars and lectures, and with many of the student's comments in interviews, all of which relate to a set of questions about the nature and purpose of learning and knowledge in English Studies. It is almost certainly true that A Level does not deal with these issues effectively, though it could do so, but it is also interesting that, despite some clarity about these issues on the part of this lecturer, neither the module nor this lecturer's seminars offer students much opportunity to confront them explicitly.

In the second interview, the lecturer expands on the idea that students seem to approach English uncritically, with preconceptions of it as an easy subject in which the idea of pleasure is untheorised:

R […] I wanted to talk to you about the experience you mentioned of applications and admissions. You talked about your feelings about the kinds of things students said about wanting to study English… [*Nods and agreement noises from L*] Could you tell me a bit more about that and what you learnt from that?

L Yeah – I mean do you - I guess also though that this would be going back a couple of years and rather than – I don't know whether students would have changed the way they present themselves on today's UCAS forms – but one of the things that struck me, particularly where students were going for joint honours – (R: Right) - was that when they talked about – and most of our joint honours students are publishing and English – and I think [one student] is doing both isn't she? – she has that combination – um – they - I felt that they tended to say why publishing would be of value to them in the future – (R: Right) and they thought about it very much as a vocational degree and they would gain skills – and I felt that particularly when they were applying for joint honours what their applications showed up was the fact that they enjoyed reading books. Once students talk about the value of an English degree for their future, it's only because they want to be a teacher.

R Right. OK

L That's what I felt was the general … it's - I love the subject. I've always liked whatever, and I want to be a teacher.

R Right

L And it's not therefore - I don't think that they think about English Literature as offering skills… or that they need to acquire skills if they want to get more in-depth knowledge…which I know is partly… um […]

R But you were suggesting, I think, before, that something about the idea of reading – of enjoying reading (L: Right, yeah) – is - is this what you were saying? – that, you know, there's a sense that it's not a critical activity?

L Yeah, yeah, absolutely, yeah – but, well… (R; laughs) - I think that's probably more prominent on their form than they recognise it is. And I think they want to prove to us that they're interested in books.

R So does that suggest a certain sort of attitude to literature – I mean is it a sort of cultural heritage attitude, or… (L: mmm, yeah, mmm…)… what do you think?

L I think that the way students present themselves is because of the cultural heritage. I've never had, even though I feel I've got some sense of what the students' syllabus might look like at A Level, I feel that they tend not to talk about more contemporary stuff that they've read – unless they already feel it's been canonised like Margaret Atwood.

This exchange provides an interesting perspective on students' mindsets on transition from school to university English. The implication of the lecturer's remarks seems to be that English is perceived by many students as a straightforward route to acquiring the cultural capital required to become a teacher, and that the main qualification they perceive necessary for this is the enjoyment of reading. Literature thus becomes a means to an end, rather than a subject perceived as valuable in its own right with transformative potential, and the uncritical and obedient acquisition of knowledge about the cultural heritage and an appropriate qualification is the underlying aim. Later

in the interview, in the context of a discussion about the idea of being a critic, she returns to this idea:

> L I mean when I did a group with – I had a group of – what year are they in when they've already sent their UCAS forms off? – anyway I had a group of those students in – and again I might talk to you about this, but I just said, you know, what we really want you to get to at the end is that you've been studying literature but you are cultural critics and actually the analytical skills you've got for analysing culture and the role that culture plays in the wider social sphere – you know, you should be able to take that into social policy research, any form of cultural research… but I think it didn't really… you know, maybe they took it on board, I'm not sure.

Throughout these interviews, in fact, there is genuine anxiety here about the dominance of a liberal humanist mode of thinking about literary study at A Level and the clash that it creates with dominant modes of literary study at university. But she also identifies certain socio-cultural shifts as potential problems for students' approaches to the subject; when asked to compare the classes she teaches now with her own experiences as a student (between 1985 and 1988) at a similar university, she says:

> L I think that I had a sense that my peers had just read more, so that actually they liked literature, and what they'd done at A Level was focus on things but they had read more widely. They'd liked, say, the Brontes, so they'd read everything by them. What I find here with students is that they, say, want to do independent study on Hardy because they liked him at A level and don't get to do any here, and I talk about a number of novels, and I realise that they actually have only read Tess because they did it at A Level. So I think their approach is slightly different…
>
> R Can you explain that?
>
> L I think something is happening culturally where literature is being slightly downgraded as a pleasurable cultural experience…
>
> R And how do you feel about that?
>
> L Part of me is disappointed because I think the way one interacts with a literary text is both important because it's private but it also feels sometimes very public, and I feel that one is less passive – all those kinds of things that I couldn't quite prove. I just don't know whether there's more competition now for kids' – young people's – time. You know, because I didn't have a phone that I could text message my friends on – and I wasn't allowed to use the phone at home because it was too expensive - you know maybe that means that there was half an hour a day where I would read before I went to bed, but they text message their friends…
>
> R Can I ask as well about the difference in intake between old universities and new universities, and if you feel that's changed between then and now?
>
> L I think there were more mature students but they were mostly women then […] I just feel that the students I mixed with – though there were plenty of nervous, slightly passive, usually young women who did literature because they thought it was easy and nice and wanted to do a degree and I think they thought it was an easy option or didn't expect to be challenged

> – there were still those – but actually I felt that the younger students were a bit more political and a bit more street-savvy than I feel that ours are – wanted to take risks a bit, quite enjoyed masquerade in seminars, and I don't feel that people try on personalities here. I think there's a general lack of political sophistication in the students, generally, regardless of economic background.

The narrow range of students' reading is often mentioned amongst lecturers' concerns about students moving from A Level to university, and is clearly related to this lecturer's wider concerns about students' lack of independence as learners and thinkers. It has recently often been blamed on the modular re-organisation of A Level under Curriculum 2000, but the question of general socio-cultural change which is raised here is surely generally under-estimated, and must have considerable implications for the way in which students are inducted into literary study. It is also notable that this lecturer is herself the product of the theory explosion in polytechnics in the 1980s, and (as she admits in discussion) the course she now teaches is still modelled on the courses that were introduced then.

The lecturer also suggests that students are less political, less challenging of convention. She returns to this idea in the second interview, specifically in relation to this class:

> L [...] I mean I really wouldn't want to say too much about the group, but certainly one of things I would say is you do need to shake them up a bit when it comes to what it is we're doing and the sort of preconceptions that they have. (Pause) But you know there are students – the students who will say to me 'I didn't study literature to learn about power relations', (R: Really!), and I think that they feel that that's – some of them – not what they'd quite bargained for.
>
> R But that hasn't happened this time? You haven't had any students saying that this time?
>
> L Not within that group.
>
> R But it's fairly common…
>
> L Mm… it has been in first year groups in previous years – you know 'I didn't expect this and it's just …' – But then I think that marks the difference with this group. It's interesting about this group – I think that they are sometimes perhaps politically and ideologically more naïve, perhaps, as a group – but they're not resisting what they're getting. That just means that they're more compliant.
>
> R Do you think that their general sort of compliance might be related to, there might be a corresponding naivete, so a group that is less compliant is less naïve as well?
>
> L Yes, I think I possibly would want to say that.
>
> R That's interesting because that suggests that a group which is more politically aware will also be more resistant to a more political approach.
>
> L Possibly – unless you can just maybe think that they're extending their political coverage.

R I suppose a more politically aware group might be more conscious of political ideology, or a political approach – might be more conscious of what's being done to them.

L Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I would love for them to come out of lectures saying not just that was hard or they lost me there, but to say… you know, I didn't like that approach… or I found that approach you know difficult…

Another productive line of questioning with this lecturer related to gender issues in the disposition of students, already hinted at above:

R Another question is to do with gender – you mentioned that at Sheffield there were a lot of women and certainly here it's at least 75% women. Is that an issue?

L Yes, I think it produces two types of male student – those who don't attend and don't do so well, perhaps partly because of the make-up of the groups - and then there are those who attend and actually quite enjoy the more scientific stuff, and I don't know whether it's just that we produce that because there are all kinds of gender – you know, it's their way of making it their own, and do very well, they really excel on the theoretical side …

R Is that a general pattern?

L Yes, I think the male students that engage with theory and aren't frightened by it do very well indeed– or they really get off on history and do these wonderful essays that show their learning: but we lose so many of them.

R And what about the women – if the men are attracted to the scientific and historical and that advantages them, what's happening to the women?

L These are broad generalisations, of course, but one of the things that worries me is that there are very vocal women who want to talk about their own experiences and bring their life experiences to literary texts, and there are certain times when that's appropriate – I think that takes me back to the personalising of literature question that we've talked about – but sometimes I worry that when we have an all-female group together talking about these experiences it's sometimes very difficult to break it down, and it sometimes worries me that a certain consensus of how we read and what we can say in seminars builds up, and women are much more keen to bring their personal histories into the seminar. Men will do it in their written work sometimes, but not in seminars so much.

R What is your feeling about why it is that there are 75% women and 25% men? Why the big gap? Is it related to what happens at school?

L Perhaps parental pressure is a factor, and I think that maybe if at A Level you were conscious of the fact that English is a discipline, that when you studied it you studied it for these reasons, then men students could stand up to their parents more, and what worries me is that now more parents have to pay, they might be less inclined for them to study this – so I think that sometimes male students think there's no value, and I think that men are a bit more target and value driven than young women are, again a generalisation.

Clearly the issue of the ratio of men to women is a major one for the subject both at A Level and at university, and there are suggestions in these comments that the emphasis on personalised and relatively untheorised approaches to literature at A

Level might be partly responsible for this, in some sense feminising the subject. This argument has, indeed, become commonplace in recent years in relation to the school English curriculum more generally, and the dominance of a particular type of literature teaching is now often identified as one of the possible factors behind the under-achievement of boys in English.

iii) Emerging issues

As I have already said, the lecturers were keen to speak with me and extremely engaged with the interviews, appearing to find them a rare and valuable experience. This in itself highlights a recurring issue in these discussions – the remoteness which lecturers feel from the A Level classroom, and the lack of opportunities available to the lecturers for meaningful contact with sixth form English teachers and departments.

Thus, whilst they were naturally quite clear about the theoretical tensions and differences which might account for discrepancies between what is taught at A Level and what is expected at university, some of the lecturers were on the whole less certain about the institutional, curricular, pedagogical and assessment contexts which affect and at least partially determine what is taught – and how – in the sixth form. Whilst they could describe the kind of approach and attitudes a student might display on arrival at university as a result of A Level, and locate it in *theoretical* terms, some seemed less clear about the way to locate and handle this in *pedagogic* and *curricular* terms, in terms of knowing what to do about it. They showed clear awareness that their pedagogy and the presentation of the course content might not always be appropriate, and acknowledged explicitly that they were aware of a range of difficulties experienced by students which were not always resolved (although they were perhaps more optimistic on these fronts than I was), but it was clear that intense limitations on the lecturers' restricted their ability to do much about this. Whilst there was evidence that courses were occasionally revised, and that lecturers' and students' evaluations were taken into account in these revisions, individual and departmental time for such processes was clearly at a premium.

It was particularly instructive to hear the lecturers' analyses of students' attitudes and approaches. They were careful not to make sweeping criticisms of A Level teachers

and the A Level course (such as one does from time to time hear from university lecturers), no doubt partly through politeness to me, as well as through a more general sensitivity to the issues. However, they certainly had a number of strong concerns about the way students present in the first year, following the A Level course.

A recurring theme in discussion with lecturers, for instance, was the students' lack of theoretical and political awareness and engagement, and the instrumental approach to study they tend to adopt; in discussion, lecturers suggested a number of possible explanations. It was felt that changes in the educational system, and in particular an increasing emphasis on assessment at a time of widening participation, had perhaps had a narrowing effect on curriculum and on students' attitudes to the broader aims of education. It was also suggested that changes in cultural, social and economic factors, as well as the political zeitgeist, had made social and political issues less pressing for them.

It was, however, issues to do with the models of reading and literary study, and the theoretical divisions which exist between A Level English Literature and university English, which were the main focus for the lecturers' concerns. Julie expressed concern that many students seemed to see English as a means of acquiring a certain sort of cultural capital – knowledge of the literary heritage – which would enable them to become English teachers, rather than as offering a set of valuable critical skills which would offer socio-cultural understanding. She expressed the hope that the study of English literature would enable students to become 'cultural critics' with 'the analytical skills … for analysing culture and the role that culture plays in the wider social sphere.' It's interesting that this description is more reminiscent of English Language, Media Studies or Sociology A Level than of English Literature A Level.

Lecturers clearly identified aspects of students' approaches and attitudes for which the model of reading and study dominant at A Level English Literature could be held accountable, and were clear that it was this model that was at least partially responsible: students' lack of familiarity with criticism and multiple interpretations, their strong focus on the fictive world of the individual text (character, theme, issue), rather than broader questions about literature, culture and society, and a lack of distinction between the pleasures and purposes of reading on the one hand and of literary study on the other. In this regard, discussion with Richard about the

problematic nature of poetry teaching, and students' dislike and ignorance of poetry, was particularly interesting.

A closely connected issue which was a strong concern for the lecturers was that of students' perceived lack of independent learning skills. Although this might be partially ascribable to the education system more generally, lecturers focused on an issue specific to English Literature: the particular manner of textual coverage dominant at A Level, in which the students are likely to be guided somewhat atomistically and in great detail through the individual set texts, and interpretations are largely controlled by the teacher who focuses on questions of authorial intention and the transmission of relevant facts for social and historical context.

Another significant related issue, which was brought into focus in discussion with Julie, is that of the gendered nature of English. Her observations about the differences between the disposition of men and women students (recounted above) also had clear resonances for me in what I had observed in seminars and in the focus group. Matt clearly corresponds with the first male type Julie identifies, the type that 'quite enjoy the more scientific stuff' and 'engage with theory and aren't frightened by it - or really get off on history.' The other three male students in the class all conformed to the other type to some extent; although none of them dropped out physically, all three did so to some extent in terms of their contributions and commitment. Billy, as we have seen, was lost intellectually early on, though he maintained commitment to the course, whilst the other two male students, Colin and Derek, though exhibiting signs of active interest in the intellectual content early in the course, quickly became disillusioned and largely opted out of discussion or even concentration. The women in the group, with one notable exception – Carrie, who was often engaged with theoretical issues – attended and paid attention consistently, but were reluctant to engage with theory. Lively discussion amongst them tended to break out only when the discussion became more personalised.

The loss of interest of a number of students, both male and female, in the group might be attributed to the inappropriateness of the course presentation. However, Julie's observation that it is male students who tend to 'enjoy the more scientific stuff' and 'engage with theory' might suggest that, if we are concerned about the imbalance in the numbers of men and women in English Literature classes at both A Level and university

– and we perhaps should be for many reasons, not least because this translates into an imbalance in the number of male and female English teachers – this may be another reason to consider whether the underlying theoretical assumptions of the teaching of literature in secondary school are adequate.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reflected separately on a range of issues emerging from the very rich data I obtained from observations, individual lecturer interviews, and focus group discussions and interviews. In the next chapter, I draw together issues emerging from the different strands of the case study in order to answer the research questions at the heart of the project, and to discuss further the implications of these findings for transition between A Level and University English.

CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A LEVEL TO UNIVERSITY: THE EXPERIENCE OF TRANSITION

In this chapter, I summarise my findings in relation to the research questions, before examining issues emerging from them in detail in order to suggest possible ways forward for A Level and HE English in relation to the transition between the two phases.

1. Overview of findings

This research project set out to discover answers to four research questions about the experience of students and lecturers in relation to transition between A Level and university English. In doing so, this project has sought to examine, in some depth, the experience of a group of students and lecturers at one university during the course of one year, in order to explore a series of fundamental issues relating to the discipline of English and its actualisation in the classroom. In examining the particular experiences of this group, I have attempted to draw out points of tension which may be manifest in specific ways in specific classrooms, but which represent points of tension in the discipline as a whole, and in its main national institutional contexts (A Level in the schools and colleges, and higher education in the universities).

In this section, then, I firstly summarise my findings in relation to the research questions, giving a brief account of the evidence arising directly from my empirical study. I then give a brief overview of broader issues emerging from the findings, to be discussed in more detail in the remaining sections of the chapter.

Answering the research questions

In setting out answers to the research questions, I take the three subsidiary questions first, eventually summarising how the evidence in relation to those questions has helped to answer the principal question.

1. What kinds of theoretical and conceptual understanding does A Level equip students with, and how do these develop and change during the first year undergraduate course?

The evidence from this research project confirms the gap between the concentrations of the A Level course and the broader cultural and linguistic issues which tend to characterise much of the work now done in university level literary studies. Whilst students are likely to have become proficient at A Level in a particular mode of appreciative textual commentary, they may arrive at university with little explicit understanding of the role of the critic or criticism in culture and language, or of the contested nature of both literature and literary studies, or of the existence or nature of a theoretical realm in literary studies beyond a basic understanding of the significance of the craft and background of the author. The evidence of this course suggests that, partly as a consequence of this, and partly as a consequence of limitations in pedagogic provision once they arrive at university, there is a significant risk that students may find the engagement with theory at university difficult, and struggle to make progress in understanding and engaging with the critical project of the course, although they are likely to become aware of new theoretical approaches and began to learn how to apply these approaches.

2. What are lecturers' and students' attitudes to and perceptions of A Level English, university English and the transition between them?

My data suggest that there is a significant distance between lecturers' views of the discipline and the expectations of students when they arrive from A Level. Lecturers acknowledge the importance of the foundational aspect of A Level English Literature in providing a grounding in the practices of close reading and literary appreciation, but they also tend to see literary studies as a discipline which promotes a broad and explicit critique of the often contested role of literature as a form in culture and society. On the whole, students' commitment to engagement with literary analysis tends to be most pronounced in the realm of discussion of the *internal* narrative worlds of fiction in terms of character, theme and plot, and to some extent in the realm of discussion of the relationship of those narrative worlds to the author's life and immediate social background, areas which have been particularly central to A Level study. This commitment tends not to be extended to poetry, however, a trend which

seems to signify a general difficulty with modes of literary discourse beyond the relatively familiar narrative modes of the novel and drama.

Upon arrival at university, my data suggest, students may also struggle to commit themselves fully to the study of theory. Whilst lecturers might argue that theoretical approaches potentially offer students the opportunity to adopt a less appreciative, less culturally obedient, view of literature than that which has been offered to them at A Level, the discrepancy between the comfortable mode of A Level study and the unfamiliar, often difficult to access, mode of university study can make it difficult for them to grasp this opportunity; thus, students are likely to express disaffection with this transformation of the dominant mode of the subject between A Level and university, and may adopt instrumental approaches. Lecturers, on the other hand, often have a clear abstract understanding of the difficulties which students face in this regard in relation to transition, but lack of time and pedagogical expertise can make it difficult for them to translate this into successful classroom strategies to enlist students fully into the new project.

3. What curricular and pedagogical strategies are employed within the HE course selected for study to support students' transition from A Level to university English?

The first year university course observed for this project seems typical of many first year courses in its formulation as an induction into university English studies, designed with transition in mind. In this case, the core course, consisting of two modules, focused initially on language and literature, and then on literary theory. Whilst this overall structure and content, and the specific structure and content of the theory module which was the main focus of the study, was logical and sympathetic, neither entirely met the learning needs of the students, especially since the set readings for the theory module were too difficult for this cohort of students, largely unmediated, and pre-supposed a confidence in and understanding of the scope and parameters of the subject which students were unlikely to have.

The course was also typical of university courses in that the dominant vehicles for delivery of the module content were the seminar and the lecture. Whilst the seminar is potentially crucial for student learning in providing a forum for lecturers to engage in dialogue with students and personalise the learning experience, as well as to reinforce

learning from lectures and independent reading, my study suggests that the seminar experience can be problematic. In the theory module observed, students had little opportunity for open discussion of, or for reflection on, issues of concern to them in relation to the course content, since the agenda of each seminar was almost exclusively set by the lecturer, and usually pitched in such a way that students were expected to engage with the material at a level with which they did not feel comfortable or confident. Although the lecturers used some strategies – such as group discussion followed by whole class feedback – which were designed to facilitate student engagement, the material presented often failed to engage at the actual level of students' learning and understanding. Under such circumstances, the learning experience offered by the seminar can be disappointing and frustrating for students, and for lecturers, and the difficulties of transition can be exacerbated.

4. What issues, in relation to the theoretical and conceptual framework of literary study, do first year undergraduates and their lecturers engage with in the transition between secondary and higher English?

The evidence of the project in relation to the first three research questions points to a number of significant issues which students and lecturers confront, in their experience of the first year university course, which have their root in theoretical and conceptual aspects of the discipline. Significant discrepancies between the way the subject is formulated conceptually at A Level and at university, highlighted in the findings from the first question, lead to a significant tension in expectations and assumptions about the nature and content of the course on the part of students and lecturers respectively, highlighted in the findings from the second question. In turn, this leads to a series of tensions in relation to decisions that must be made about the presentation of content through curriculum and pedagogy, highlighted in the findings from the third question.

At the root of the problem lies the discrepancy between the theoretical models which inform English Literature at A Level and in HE. Whilst A Level provides a grounding in certain foundational aspects of the discipline, it tends not to equip students with even a basic introduction to a theoretical discourse rooted in questions about the nature and purpose of literature, literary study, and literary criticism, focusing instead on a set of restricted questions largely internal to the narratives of individual texts. The

assumptions which underlie the A Level course tend to become naturalised in students, creating significant problems in terms of access and motivation when students transfer to the university, and posing a set of problems for lecturers in finding ways of engaging students in theoretical approaches through effective pedagogy.

Issues emerging from the findings

A strong picture emerges from these findings of a number of considerable difficulties which exist in relation to transition in English, apparent in discrepancies between the experience of students at A Level and their experience at university, between the philosophy and practice of the curriculum at A Level and at university, between the assumptions and expectations of students and those of lecturers, and between the curriculum and the pedagogy of the subject.

While a gap in theoretical models is central, a network of complex issues underlies the cold facts of the findings as stated above. Thus, in the remaining sections of this chapter, I reflect in more detail on aspects of my findings in the various strands of the project which point to possible ways forward in the transition between A Level and university English.

First, I explore issues connected with the actualisation of the course in the university classroom. I look briefly at some generic issues connected with the broad institutional and disciplinary contexts in which the first year university course takes place – the tension between teaching and research in the university; the structures of modules, courses and seminars; and the formulation of the discipline. I go on to look in more detail at the pedagogic approaches adopted by lecturers in the literary theory module; the attitudes and perceptions informing these approaches; and the receptiveness of students to those approaches.

Second, I explore ways in which some of the issues emerging from the course could form the basis of a number of moves to strengthen the process of transition through improved dialogue between the two phases. I discuss some of the attitudes to reading and literature which inform and underlie what happens in the classroom at both phases, suggesting ways of bringing the two phases closer. I also look at the need to develop mutually supportive curricula and approaches to teaching and learning.

2. Lessons from / in the classroom.

i) English in context – institutions, courses, curriculum, pedagogy

This study has focused particularly on the attitudes, perceptions and experiences of students and lecturers in relation to the transition between A Level and university English, and especially in relation to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the discipline. Various factors play a part in shaping this experience, including the institutional context of higher education study, as well as choices about curriculum and pedagogy. In this section, I begin by briefly examining the generic institutional and disciplinary contexts which provide the broad structures within which curriculum and pedagogy is formulated, and which therefore offer a set of fixed challenges for English departments in determining curriculum and pedagogy. I then turn to the literary theory module which formed the central focus of the study, as a means to raising questions about the formulation of appropriate curriculum and pedagogy.

The institutional context

The over-arching structures of the university present two particular challenges to the English department in relation to transition – issues pertaining to the balance between teaching and research, and issues relating to the units of instruction and the construction of courses.

In the institution which I studied, the balance between teaching and research was typical of most HE institutions, and students could expect highly reduced teaching times compared with their experiences at A Level, with lessons replaced by a system of lectures and seminars.[120] In addition, their lecturers – again, as in most HE institutions – were likely to be less highly trained or experienced in pedagogic issues than A Level teachers.[121] Whilst there are entirely practical reasons for all this, and

[120] Smith (2004) and Wisker et al (2001) discuss the unfamiliarity of these learning modes, whilst Smith and Hopkins (2005) and Jacobs (2006) stress that the *social,* as well as the academic, context in which learning takes place in HE - with a succession of different teachers and in a succession of different classes - is potentially less secure than at A Level.

[121] Pedagogy remains a minority interest amongst lecturers (Knights (2005a; b); Green (2007)), a situation probably exacerbated by the pressure of the university Research

whilst there are potential advantages for student independent learning through modes such as the lecture, and in reduced contact time between teacher and student, the combination of reduced contact time, unfamiliar modes of teaching and learning, and possibly limited lecturer expertise in pedagogy is an issue which is significant in relation to transition between school and university, and in the light of which decisions about effective curriculum and pedagogy have to be made.

In addition, the modular course structure which pertained at this institution was typical of the majority of HE institutions. Such course structures tend to differ from those at A Level in that, for instance, no one teacher has close oversight of a students' learning throughout the course.[122] The implications of such a system for the transference of learning in the process of transition, and from one module to the next, are significant, and again must inform decisions about effective curriculum and pedagogy.

The disciplinary context

A recent survey of the university English curriculum by the English Subject Centre (Halcrow Group Ltd, 2003) gathered data from over 50 university English departments and found that the most common curriculum focuses at university level were: literary periods, genres and history; issues of reading and interpretation; staff's specialist interests; and literary theory. Individual authors came a long way down the list, with only 4 institutions saying that these were important 'to a large extent' in their provision. By contrast 13 institutions felt that language or linguistic study was a main focus, 19 institutions theory, 22 genre and 37 period. Whilst 38 of the institutions felt that the study of individual authors was important 'to some extent,' this needs to be seen in the context of 35 who placed thematic approaches in the same category, 33 for

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Assessment Exercise (Childs (2005); Knights, (2006)). In recent years, however, there has been a notable attempt in the British university system to raise the profile of pedagogy through the work of the Higher Education Academy and its Subject Centres (see, for instance, Knights (2005a)). Knights and Green (2006a; b) make powerful arguments for pedagogy as a central element of disciplinary subject knowledge.

[122] Whilst A Levels are now organised in a modular fashion too, the learning experience tend to be more tightly controlled – at school level by the teacher(s) who oversee the students for the entire course, and at exam board level through centralised syllabus construction, assessment and administration. Nevertheless, modular structures at A Level have been partially blamed for a perceived increase in instrumental approaches to learning on the part of students (Hodgson and Spours, (2003), Atherton (2003), Green (2005a) Knights (2004)).

theory, 33 for cultural history and 30 for cultural politics. Of the institutions surveyed, 62% deployed compulsory literary theory modules in the first year, 58% courses on literary genres, and 57% courses on practical criticism or textual practices. These figures are directly reflected in the first year course at the university in which I collected data, which consisted of a literary linguistics module and a literary theory module.

This clearly illustrates a fundamental difference between A Level Literature and university English: that the study of individual authors, which dominates A Level study, is not considered significant in most university English faculties as an over-arching rationale for study. Furthermore it illustrates that the study of theory, genre and period are felt to be considerably more significant, and cultural history and politics as important, as author study, and that the application of critical reading approaches to texts which are *not* set texts (e.g. through practical criticism or close reading exercises) is of considerable importance. The emphases of A Level Literature and university Literature are, in practice, substantially different, and this is likely to be a significant issue in relation to transition between school and university English.

ii) The experience and approach of lecturers

I move now to look in more detail at specific aspects of the way in which the literary theory module observed was formulated and actualised in terms of teacher and student experience. In this section, I look at the relationship of the module to the overall structure of the course, and in subsequent sections I look more closely at the attitudes and perceptions of lecturers and students in relation to the module.

The module as part of the first year course

The two-term literary theory module I observed was the second of two compulsory core modules in the first year.[123] The first module was a one-term linguistic module, the intention behind which was to provide a linguistic groundwork for textual analysis. As the lecturer Richard explained, one aim here was de-familiarisation – to divert students from the particular kind of literary analysis which they would have been

[123] No other core English modules were offered, although students had the option of following a drama module and a Renaissance module both of which were partly literary in content.

steeped in at A Level, and to help them to see literary texts in the context of a broader approach to literary analysis. The module was interesting, accessible and well taught, but it was notable that the methods, knowledge, terminology and approach covered in it were never referred to in the second module, which took an entirely different approach. This is not, of course, to say that it was not relevant: there were many ways in which it might have been; but it is to suggest that nothing was made of these connections in the second module. It might be argued that such micro-planning is inappropriate at this level, at which students are expected to take from one learning situation and apply to others, but it must be at least questionable whether, especially in the first year of the course, students possess the meta-cognitive frameworks and awareness to do this effectively.

The literary theory module was intended to re-introduce a focus on literary texts, but in a theoretical context very different from that of A Level – again, a de-familiarisation strategy. Again, the intention was to provide a groundwork for future literary analysis. In abstract terms, the module was clear and logical: the module lecturer explained that study of theory had been interspersed with set literary texts throughout so that students would have the more familiar study of the single established literary text to support the relatively unfamiliar study of theory, and so that the application of theory could be modelled. Despite this, the strategy of defamiliarisation was problematic in that it appeared to assume in students a level of familiarity with the broad frameworks and principles of literature, literary study and literary interpretation which they were unlikely to have. To move so swiftly from the narrow focus of A Level English Literature on a few isolated set texts – studied in something of a critical and theoretical vacuum – to a high level, abstract theoretical discourse about the nature of interpretation and textuality seemed highly problematic, assuming a layer of disciplinary knowledge and meta-cognitive awareness that students had not yet acquired.

Thorough guidance on the technical aspects and objectives of the course as a whole was set out in the course handbook, but students were not given active opportunities to establish basic personal or disciplinary rationales for their study, and there was little to draw together students' experiences.[124] In particular, despite the acknowledged gap

[124] There must be some doubt as to whether a course handbook, however clearly it outlines a course, can fulfil this purpose. One of the texts set for supportive reading material in the first module – Rob Pope's *The English Studies Book* – is an excellent

between A Level and HE English, students were not, during the first year course as a whole, given an opportunity to reflect on their experience at A Level, or to compare it with their experience at HE (although they were told clearly, and sometimes in a manner dismissive of A Level, to expect them to be different – for instance in the short introductory lecture at the beginning of the year by the head of the English faculty.)

Lectures and seminars.

A recurrent issue in the seminars and lectures observed in the literary theory module was the extent to which lecturers pitched their teaching at a level of conceptual difficulty students could deal with, informed by an understanding of what students might or might not already know, and supported by strategies for enabling them to learn effectively.

This appeared to be considerably less of a problem in lectures than in seminars, which were generally self-contained and well-geared towards the task of explication of specific issues at a relatively accessible level for students. Most lectures were well-structured and well-controlled in terms of the way lecturers used language and visual aids; most lecturers communicated effectively, and retained students' attention, serving to clarify some of the issues in the week's readings.

In seminars, where the teaching and learning dynamics are more complex, there were more problems. Some of the problems here related to the classroom style of individual lecturers, and others to course content. An underlying problem relating to the module as a whole was the set readings in the literary theory reader, which were not only too difficult for first year undergraduates, certainly at this level (and perhaps at any level), but also relatively abstract and unmediated. The reader itself gave very little, if any, help; there were no advance handouts from the seminar leaders; and, in the seminars

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guide to the discipline, and a careful reading of it provides significant help with meta-cognitive frameworks, but the readings on meta-cognitive issues were not discussed in the first module, and the book was not referred to at all in the second module. Again, it is debatable whether such meta-cognitive connections can effectively be left entirely to supporting materials of this kind.

themselves, the readings were often assumed to have been assimilated unproblematically. [125]

The seminar leader would often begin applying the theory under consideration to the literary text under consideration without ensuring that the essays had been read and understood, or without allowing or enabling discussion of what had been read – either the theoretical or the literary texts. Mediation of the readings was generally restricted to the lectures which came immediately before the seminars. On the whole, these did a good job of outlining and breaking down the theories, and suggesting applications and implications, but the forum of the lecture does not allow for the resolution of difficulties through discussion, and in any case the placing of the lecture directly before the seminar was not helpful in that it could not efficiently serve the purpose of *preparing* students for the reading and subsequent seminar discussion.

A further issue relating to course content was that of lecturers' language. Whilst most lecturers were conscious to some extent of the need to qualify and define abstract conceptual language and technical terms, such language – both in the seminars and some of the lectures observed - was often used in ways which students were likely either not to have understood at all or to have understood only vaguely. At times, lecturers would explain the specific concepts under consideration, but set them in the context of other concepts which students were unlikely to have known about. Even where they succeeded in using more accessible language, lecturers often made assumptions about students' grasp of the general conceptual contexts and frameworks which might help to make sense of the topic in question.[126]

Lecturers were consistently friendly and encouraging, and attempted to engage students through humour, and a relaxed but authoritative style. In seminars, both whole-class and small-group discussion often took place; however, tasks tended to be closed and specific, with agendas tightly set by lecturers with an eye to what they

[125] It is difficult to see why this scenario should arise when there are a number of good, accessible introductions to literary theory available. (Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory* (1995), for instance, is used as a central text in many literary theory courses).

[126] Chris Hopkins' textbook for first year students, *Thinking About Texts*, by contrast illustrates a more measured approach to introducing students to concepts and frameworks through a series of seminar-style readings and activities.

wanted to have achieved by the end of the seminar, rather than the reality of what students had understood. In particular, I felt strongly the need for students to ask their own questions and set their own agendas to some extent within the teacher-established and teacher-led framework of the course, module or seminar – but this virtually never happened in the entire module.

As a result, whilst lecturers were aware of the need in seminars to deploy pedagogical strategies, such as small-group discussion before whole-class feedback (the most frequently used), the strategies used were not always effective, and there was rarely a sense of concrete progress having been made in these sessions. In the first term of the module, in particular, strategies often had to be adjusted hurriedly when student silences gave the lecturer no avenue for development as planned. These observations are in line with Wisker's (2001) observation, based on student questionnaire responses, that 'some seminars in criticism are so high-powered that students are silenced', as well as Smith's (2002a) comments about lecturers making assumptions about what students know and can do.[127]

Lecturers were generous, within the constraints of the system, with their offers of help for individual students - sometimes by inviting them to ask questions in the seminar if they were not sure of things, more often by inviting them to talk to them in office hours. It was clear, however, that students were inhibited from taking up both offers, partly because of the very clear limit on the time available for such consultation in the context of a more distant relationship between teacher and student than they will have experienced at A Level, but perhaps as much because of the way in which lecturers seemed to have exaggerated expectations of them and, consequently, because of the gap which they must have felt existed between the lecturers' concerns and their own concerns.

It is clear that not all seminars run along the lines I observed in the literary theory module. Jones et al. (2005) describe a very different type of seminar, at another university. The group is far smaller; discussion is free and relaxed; the lecturer gently attempts to move the students towards a more theoretical approach during discussion,

[127] Smith also focuses on students' difficulties with seminars and lectures – although he suggests that lectures are more problematic than seminars.

but largely fails. Here, we see, perhaps, an alternative manifestation of the same problem. The lecturer adopts the strategy of starting from where the students are, leading to lively discussion, but does not succeed in equipping them with the theoretical framework they need to progress. Again, an explicit approach to meta-cognitive issues might have been useful.[128]

Lecturers' attitudes and perceptions

In conversation with lecturers, two main (and strongly related) strands of concern emerged. First, there was a strong concern about what lecturers perceived as the instrumental, assessment-led approach of students to their learning. Related to this was a concern about students' lack of independent learning skills. It was felt that many students arrived at university with a highly directional attitude to learning, and that this problem had worsened over the years. Thus, it was felt that many students often only wanted to know what they needed to know for the purposes of examinations, and lacked genuine motivation to learn – a kind of compliance with the system which stopped short of authentic intellectual engagement. This perceived instrumental approach was linked with an additional worry about the narrowness of A Level study, with its emphasis on explication of set texts, and the consequent tendency of students to be 'spoon-fed' by their teachers at this level.[129]

Lecturers were very clear about these tendencies in their students – and there is no doubt that these are very significant issues, perhaps exacerbated by recent developments in secondary education (league tables, assessment objectives, widening participation, etc.) and consumerist approaches to higher education. However, I also

[128] Jones et al. suggest, however, that at this stage – about half way through the first year – the lecturer felt it more important to 'prioritise the interpersonal… over the ideational' (p. 256) through which strategy he might eventually 'inculcate a particular literary critical discourse' (p. 257). They go on to comment on the fact that 'students' willingness to enter into the process … is provisional' and that 'lecturers have to earn the right to teach, so to speak, on the basis of the intellectual productivity of their relationship with students.'

[129] This is again in line with Wisker's (2001) findings which point to the large number of first year English students who take a 'surface/accumulation approach' to learning as opposed to 'a deep or meaning-oriented approach.' Green (2005a) and Smith and Hopkins (2005) also find concerns about instrumental, teacher-led and set-text dominated approaches to learning a major issue for lecturers in their surveys of a range of higher education institutions.

felt that lecturers were apparently less able to see that their own pedagogical approaches might be exacerbating the problem. Lecturers quite reasonably expected students to learn independently (in contradistinction with being spoon-fed), but it must be likely that independent learning would be better served if lecturers were to pitch challenging material at an accessible level, starting from what the students already know and can do, and use appropriate pedagogical strategies to enable them to engage genuinely in their learning and thus make recognisable progress.[130]

Lecturers were strongly aware that students may not be highly intellectually motivated and may have divergent values regarding and motivations for learning, and were of course able to theorise this issue in conversation with me, and yet often did not seem to recognise the implications of these things for their pedagogy.[131] In their reflections on their work with the students, some lecturers seemed only partially aware of these problems of pedagogy, and seemed to me sometimes to be unduly optimistic about how well students were doing and how much they were understanding.

Lecturers' second main area of concern, related to the first, was the need for students to adopt a more critical approach to literary study, informed by a set of socio-cultural and theoretical questions which they felt A Level did not introduce students to (in line with Eaglestone's arguments in *Doing English* (2000) and Atherton's in *Defining Literary Criticism* (2005)). Lecturers clearly wanted students to be motivated by cultural analysis – textual, linguistic, political, etc. – rather than the set-text-centred aesthetic, personal response, and culturally obedient 'heritage' modes of reading which they felt were promoted by A Level. They were sceptical about the emphasis on detailed reading of set texts at A Level, as opposed to a broader study, and wished to see

[130] Knights (2007) writes: "Commitment to 'the student experience' does not have to come at the cost of denying the difficulty of learning or betraying the altogether serious demands of knowledge about literature, language and culture… Yet such commitment does require that the English constellation think much harder… about its own procedures, rhetorics, support systems' (p.2)

[131] An issue again recognised by Knights (2007): "…we have to acknowledge and work towards the needs of those whom we might not have seen as the 'ideal readers' of our effort. For them, too, 'English', as subject matter and practice, offers the opportunity to nourish the roots of citizenship…" (p.3)

students engaging both more critically and more creatively with ideas about the nature of literature and its functions.[132]

Again, whilst these concerns are founded in significant issues in relation to the A Level course, it was noticeable that the lecturers' abstract, theoretical understanding of the problems that students might encounter as a result of their A Level experience did not necessarily translate into concrete action in terms of curriculum and pedagogy – such as providing opportunities for students to explore meta-cognitive aspects of their learning (the purposes and frameworks of their study, their experiences and expectations of it, the boundaries of the discipline, and so on, cf Hopkins and Smith, (2005)); offering opportunities for 'active reading' responses to text (cf Pope (1995), Knights & Thurgar-Dawson (2006), Green (2006)); or building in a clear sense of progression from week to week, or across the module, or between modules.

In this regard, it is interesting that the department in which my research was based has now rewritten its first year programme so that the opening module is essentially a study skills in English course designed to ease the transition from A Level to university. Hopkins and Smith (2005) go further in suggesting that students should be 'involved in practical and theoretical debates about how and why university English is so different in its organization and ambitions from their previous experience.' (p. 315)

A final major issue is the extent to which lecturers are aware of or have experience of what happens at A Level. Whilst all the lecturers I spoke to had a clear idea of the kind of experience of texts A Level provides, gleaned from what their students say (for instance, in UCAS forms), they were sometimes quite vague about the precise curricular and institutional contexts in which this happened; but more to the point, they had had little - if any - contact with A Level teachers, and even less with A Level classrooms. Of course, the same must be said about most A Level teachers in relation to university English. Here we have concrete evidence, if any were needed, that

[132] It should be noted, however, that, whilst they were sceptical about the emphasis on the detailed study of set texts at A Level, they were also (in common with many other lecturers) aware that such 'detailed study' did not always bring about expertise in 'close reading' and awareness of literary language and textuality, but rather a form of narrow learning about the content of texts. (See Barlow (2007a; 2007b) on close reading).

Hollindale's (1986) observation about 'the lack of professional unity between school and university teachers' holds true twenty years later.

iii) The experience and approach of students

The legacy of A Level English Literature

Students' experiences of A Level conformed to a typical pattern. Their study was largely restricted to seven or eight fairly accessible set texts, which they prepared in great detail. They studied little or no literary criticism, and did not engage in exploration of broad issues to do with the nature of literature or interpretation.[133] Only one student (Matt) seemed to have had a teacher who had introduced some broader literary concepts, but in fact it was also Matt who stressed that Sociology A Level had stood him in better stead for studying theory than English A Level.

Despite the significant difference from A Level Literature in the nature of their study, the focus group students did not, on the whole, seem to think that they should have done something different at A Level to prepare for this. Rather, they saw the A Level course as having been an enjoyable and secure experience which gave them a base on which to build, with lessons providing a comfortable environment in which they could discuss ideas about texts in a relatively informal and uninhibited way, with plenty of teacher guidance. Nevertheless, they readily demonstrated in seminars and in interviews that there were a number of significant areas in which they would have benefited from being better prepared at A Level – even had the pedagogy and curriculum of the first year undergraduate course been more appropriate.

Students tended to carry over from A Level a concept of literary appreciation as a technical exercise which culminates in the display of knowledge about and acceptable readings of a text in an examination, based on notions of theme, character, plot and language intrinsic to each text, rather than of literary study as a broad critical

[133] Green (2005) comments, about teachers' approach to context and interpretation after Curriculum 2000 that 'in many cases the application of theoretical and critical material is minimal and mechanical' and that 'the extent to which A Level students are engaged in any meaningful application of such … material, even within the synoptic papers, is open to question.' (p. 265).

engagement with culture and society, or of literariness as an aesthetic and linguistic phenomenon. They were very inexperienced at reading literary criticism or engaging with any kind of theoretical discourse relating to literature, bringing to mind Marland's (2003) observation about the failure of the education system to teach 'advanced reading skills' in particular in relation to non-narrative texts, especially in English.

Although it was not possible to corroborate this entirely in the limited time I had with them, it seemed very likely, on the basis of the evidence of their responses in seminars and interviews, that students' experience at A Level had given them little knowledge about or awareness of a number of fundamental aspects of the modern discipline, even at a basic level – for instance, the nature and implications of the discipline of English, (e.g., the contested nature of literature and literary study; the purposes and rationales of literary study; and certain broad literary concepts such as the canon, criticism, interpretation, language and theory), and the nature and implications of the wider literary and cultural contexts of literary study, (e.g., narrative and genre; literary movements; the production and reception of texts; the roles of institutions, writers, publishers, critics and readers; the relationships between literary and non-literary texts/language, between literature and other media, and between literature, art and performance; the relationship between art, culture and society, and between language and power; the notions of discourse and representation, etc.).

This deficit in A Level Literature met with an apparent assumption in the first year university course that students were at some level explicitly familiar with these frameworks, and a consequent lack of opportunity for them to confront these issues. Thus disempowered, many of them appeared to lack engagement with the subject at the same time as adopting an obedient, instrumental approach to course and assessment structures; tending not to question explicitly the value or underlying rationale of the study they are engaged in, but rather to compartmentalise their scepticism and disengagement as irrelevant to the job of getting a degree, they may have tended to confirm lecturers' views of their passivity as learners.

A Level: wider issues

In addition to the subject-specific knowledge mentioned above, students frequently needed, and often appeared to lack, knowledge about, awareness of and opportunities to discuss significant historical, cultural and political movements such as Marxism,

feminism and colonialism, as well as a general political awareness and awareness of significant contemporary social and cultural issues, which might help them to gain access to the language and culture of higher education. It might be argued that the A Level system does not cater adequately for this type of cross-curricular citizenship / general studies education – and indeed these issues of breadth and entitlement have been a recurring issue in the history of debates about A Level, for instance in recent suggestions that a baccalaureate system should be adopted at this level (e.g., Hodgson and Spours 2003).

It is also possible that students would have benefited from explicit guidance in relation to the issue of the potential clash between an instrumental view of education which is aimed at passing exams and getting jobs, and the intellectual nature of academic pursuits. Making this issue explicit could help to make students more aware of the socio-cultural tensions involved in education and of the possible ramifications of this for their own study, perhaps leading to a valuable explicit and personal formulation of their rationale in undertaking the study[134]. Further, and more straightforwardly, there is no doubt that sixth form students would benefit from a greater understanding of the nature and difficulties of learning at university before they start there[135]. These general points are strongly supported by the arguments of Marland (2003), Boughey (2003), and Clerehan (2003) about the need to provide 'epistemological access' to advanced learning.

The first year course - lectures and seminars

Lectures and seminars were well attended at the beginning of terms, though attendance tended to drop away as time went on. Students appeared not to have great problems with taking notes in lectures (though of course it is difficult to know how effectively this was done), and the focus group students commented that they generally

[134] King (2004), then a lecturer in English at Queen Mary, University of London, comments: "It is my experience that students learn best when they're asked to think about how whatever subject they're doing relates to them both personally and in the world – that is, by responding to the questions 'what can I now do?', 'how can I work out what I think?' and 'why does it matter'?" (p. 6)

[135] Smith and Hopkins (2005), for instance, in their study of A Level students' expectations of English at university, comment on their sometimes exaggeratedly unrealistic expectations of contact time with lecturers.

found the lectures useful and easy to follow.[136] They were, however, less sanguine about seminars, noting the awkwardness and silences, and some commenting on the difficulty of knowing what they should say, or the precise nature of what they were doing. It was clear that they felt insecure, inhibited, unwilling to speak, unsure of their relationship with the lecturer and other students, and unsure that the seminars would provide what they needed.

As I have observed previously, apart from small group discussion, there was little active student participation in the seminars (cf Wisker 2001). A few particularly confident students dominated class discussion, and only two or three students ever responded in a way which indicated an engagement at the theoretical level signalled by the course content. However, class discussion often did not develop substantially and was sometimes brought to a premature end by lack of student contribution. As the module progressed, many students became less engaged and less inclined to contribute.

The first year course - attitudes and perceptions

Amongst the focus group students, experiences and attitudes varied, in ways that seemed sometimes to be related to gender and class. The more confident middle-class students in the group were apparently better equipped, or at least more determined, to deal with the linguistic and conceptual challenge of the module, whilst the others suffered a notable decline in morale, with two of the female students deciding to drop English at the end of the year.[137] In the class as a whole, as well as within the focus group, and in line with one of the lecturer's observation of general trends, male and female students tended to adopt different approaches to the challenge of the class, with female students on the whole (by far in the majority) apparently motivated by a more assiduous work ethic than male students. Male students divided into those who were strongly motivated by the intellectual content of the course (Matt) and the

[136] I observed, however, unsurprisingly, that students managed note-taking in lectures far more effectively where the level of the discourse was appropriate, and the structure of the lecture was clear.

[137] Again, this is in line with Marland, Boughey and Clerehan's concerns about 'epistemological access' in a widening participation scenario.

others, who, despite an early interest in new ways of working, became disillusioned and, in at least two cases, noticeably disengaged.[138]

Students were very clear that the nature of the study they were engaged in was significantly different from what they had been used to at A Level. On the whole, they were surprisingly accepting of the difficulties they encountered, seeming to accept that both the course content and the course methods encountered were simply part of what it meant to be at university, and that they had to learn to do things differently – although the less confident in the focus group were clearly struggling, and one (Billy) expressed his feeling that he was out of his depth: he did not understand the work, and found the seminars baffling.

As the course went on, a number of the students seemed to become focused on 'getting through' the assessments, saying that as long as they understood enough to do that, they would be happy – an attitude which perhaps reflected lecturers' concerns about instrumental approaches. It would be unfair, however, to suggest that this instrumentalism could be attributed entirely to lack of intellectual dynamism. In some cases, at least, (and in particular in the case of Billy), it seemed to manifest itself as much as a product of desperation in the face of confusion and difficulty, as of wilful disregard for the intellectual content of the course.

Despite students' difficulties, there was clear evidence in the focus group that students used resources additional to those offered in the seminars and lectures to try to make sense of what they had experienced, as indeed would be expected of any university student. For instance, at least two students told me that they were using, and finding valuable, Rob Pope's *English Studies Book*, a set text in the first module, to support their reading in the second module and clarify concepts.

[138] The question of the gendering of English Studies has been examined recently by Knights (2005; Knights, 2007). It is notable that both A Level English Literature and undergraduate English have a large majority of female students and it is often observed that it is the 'soft' character of the subject, particularly at school level, concerned with personal responses and interpretations rather than the application of factual, technical or theoretical frameworks to a firm body of knowledge, which is responsible for this. If this is the case, it is ironic that the theoretical content is in fact often very strong at university.

3. Building bridges – key issues

The data from this research project suggest that a number of key issues confront schools and universities in considering the transition between A Level and HE English. On the one hand, there are theoretical issues concerning the nature of the discipline as represented in these different phases of education, the values enshrined in it, and the motivations of those engaged in teaching and learning within it; on the other hand, there are more practical considerations related to the development of pedagogy and curriculum in both phases and the institutional relationships between the two phases. In this final section, I discuss these key issues, suggesting aspects of them which point towards possible directions for future development.

Whereas this thesis began with a historical study of the disciplinary circumstances and contexts of the A Level - HE transition, exposing a number of theoretical issues at stake in the formulation of the curriculum, analysis of the data from the empirical study undertaken has inevitably underlined the way in which the processes of teaching and learning actualise the curriculum and suggest ways forward for the curriculum. This final chapter therefore moves towards reflections on the role which might be played by constructivist theories of learning in making the English Literature curriculum effective.

(i) Towards better transitions

The cycle of English

One starting point for this discussion is the question of whether the transition between A Level Literature and university English is, in fact, important. Raising the issue of school to university transition within a single A Level subject sometimes elicits the response that it is of little significance to teachers since only a very small proportion of students who study English Literature at A Level will go on to study English at university. For a number of reasons this strikes me as an inadequate response.

First, even those students who have studied English Literature A Level but are going on to study subjects other than English at university – a significant and increasing number of students at a time of widening participation – stand to benefit from a conception of the subject at A Level which takes into account the modes of learning and critical approaches which are likely to be encountered in HE – especially perhaps the attention to reading critical texts and to understanding of cultural contexts which, as my data suggest, are areas in which tensions between A Level and HE English are strong. They also, of course, stand to benefit from curriculum and pedagogy which enables them to learn effectively in HE whatever subject they choose: thus a focus on transition in all subjects, not just English, is valuable.

Second, although it is true that only a small proportion of A Level English students go on to read English at university, the experience of these students is important not only in itself, but also in relation to the health of the discipline – for it is a number of these students who will go on to become English teachers and re-initiate the cycle of English teaching from school student to university student to teacher. My data show that aspects of the disjunction between the subject at A Level and the discipline at university have the power adversely to affect the quality of the student experience of learning in university English, which is in itself a significant issue. Further, however, evidence from lecturers in initial teacher training in English, (e.g., Butcher (2003), Goodwyn (2002)), as well as my own personal experiences working with trainee teachers, suggests that they encounter a range of subject knowledge issues in the transition from university English to teaching English as a school subject which reflect some of the issues which I have identified in this project in the transition from A Level to university. Goodwyn suggests, for instance, that trainee English teachers often 'revert' to their subject identity as A Level literature students after their English degrees, apparently having chosen to 'leave behind' the theoretical issues encountered at university.

There are, too, additional issues about the relationship between school English and university English which go beyond those concerned with the different paradigms for literary study in operation at A Level and in HE English. English as a school subject has increasingly become concerned with broader aspects of literacy, language and culture (especially media study) than are represented by the study of literature, and at least partially concerned with enabling students to develop critical literacy in a range of

cultural contexts beyond literature (NATE Post-16 Committee (2005); Jacobs, (2005)). Whilst the new emphases in literary study in HE embrace aspects of linguistic and cultural theory considerably more than the A Level Literature course, most English courses at university level nevertheless tend to maintain a sharp focus on literature, and most English departments remain predominantly literature-based. If the evidence presented in my data is reproduced elsewhere, it is possible that university level literary study does not successfully help students to locate the study of literature within a broader framework of contemporary English Studies, or within a continuum of cultural and linguistic study, which might potentially then help to pave the way for the breadth of subject knowledge required by an English teacher. In this respect, it is interesting that the degree course observed for this study was an 'English Studies' course, beginning with a module in literary linguistics – and yet the degree was essentially a literature degree which did not re-visit broader issues of language again after the first term.

Bringing institutions together

If these issues are to be confronted, one of the pre-requisites must surely be the creation of dialogue between teachers and institutions in the two phases. My study confirms that contact between teachers and students in English in these phases is scarce – a pattern which is widely acknowledged to be the case nationwide. English departments in universities, as in my case study, are aware of transitional issues and make some decisions about curriculum and pedagogy with these in mind, yet, without dialogue with A Level teachers, they are working with limited information. Further, despite recent moves to bring A Level Literature more into line with university English, there is little attention paid to transition issues in schools, or to the disciplinary relationship with university English.

As I have suggested elsewhere, there are increasing moves on the part of qualifications authorities to bring the curriculum in the two phases closer together, and the English Subject Centre is developing approaches to pedagogy and to transition in HE English which are being promulgated at a national level. Yet there is little sense of the possibility either of an attempt to formulate mutually supportive curricula or pedagogies at the two phases through a bringing together of expert teachers from both secondary education and higher education in committee, or of a widespread move to

bring students and teachers in schools and universities in local areas together on a regular basis.

Whilst such collaborations are rare in the UK, they are not unknown. A recent example is an exceptionally large-scale project run by the Villiers Park Educational Trust and Sheffield University (Blake, 2006) to bring teachers in the English faculty at Sheffield University into regular contact with teachers and students in the English departments of Sheffield secondary schools and colleges in order to develop subject knowledge and good practice in the classroom at both levels. Such projects are rare, however, even on a much smaller scale, though there seems no doubt that more such collaborations would be valuable.

Subject associations and qualification authorities could potentially have a key role in helping to propagate such networks and collaborations nationally, although the extent of their influence on actual classroom practice at local level is somewhat limited. It is notable, too, that, in effect, no cross-phase association or authority exists to help break down the long-standing stand-off between schools and universities in English. The history of this division is reflected in the history of the subject associations. Where once there was one English Association for school and university English, there are now two associations – one for secondary English (NATE) and one for higher English (The English Association), a separation which came about during a time of progressive change in school English in the 1960s, and which has not been mended despite the equally radical changes which have since taken place in HE English.[139]

Despite this, there have been some developments at the level of national associations. The HE English Subject Centre has, since its inception in 2000, made significant moves on a small scale, towards creating partnerships with representatives of secondary English (Bleiman (2006); Green (2005a); Goddard and Beard (2007)), and has sought recently to involve a small number of representatives from secondary teaching

[139] In fact, the English Association maintains a small secondary branch, but its membership now consists almost exclusively of the independent schools; its secondary journal *Use of English* until recently maintained a stridently Leavisite tone. This situation seems anomalous in the light of the fact that the HE fellowship of the English Association embraces and represents the mainstream of the university discipline; however, this internal division within one association further demonstrates the separateness of secondary and higher English.

associations and education faculties in their activities, and to be represented at some secondary English events, whilst the English Association has sought occasionally to bring representatives of its higher and secondary wings together. A group of representatives of secondary and higher English associations, the Common English Forum, was set up a few years ago, meeting three times a year to discuss issues of concern to both phases.

Key issues and the need for dialogue

Although it may be true that, as a result of these moves, there is more dialogue between representatives of the two phases at present than there has been for many years, it is difficult to envisage a scenario in the near future in which curriculum and pedagogy at either phase might be re-shaped through widespread dialogue between the two phases. And yet my research suggests that the two phases of the discipline have a considerable amount to learn from and about each other, and about the attitudes and motivations of the students moving between them, which could ease the difficulties of transition and bring about an improved understanding of the way in which students and teachers experience teaching and learning in the discipline. Further, my research suggests that there are many starting points for development in work being done at both levels.

In the remainder of this section, I seek therefore to examine a number of key issues about curriculum and pedagogy, and their interrelationship, in both phases in English, which have emerged from this project, and which could inform future dialogue and developments.

ii) Developing approaches to reading

Attitudes, motivations and values

Although this study set out primarily to investigate the way in which conceptual tensions in literary study play themselves out in the classroom, a recurring theme in considering the effectiveness of the teaching and learning observed throughout the project has been that of student motivation. This is not merely a question of student *effort*, although undoubtedly there will always be hard-working and less hard-working students; rather it is a question of student *attitude* – their levels of interest and engagement in the project of English Studies, their motivations for study, and the values

which they ascribe to their learning. It is thus also a question of the values and attitudes which are embedded in the curriculum and manifested through pedagogy.

An oft-expressed sentiment on the part of lecturers, including some of those in my study, is that of the instrumentalism and lack of intellectual curiosity of students, and the frequent observation that these have increased in recent decades. Although, as I have previously suggested, there may never have been a 'golden age' when student instrumentalism and intellectual conservatism were not apparent, there have certainly been recent social developments which might have exacerbated these problems. Growing social and economic pressure to participate in post-16 education as a result of the move to widening participation has led to increased numbers attending university including many who may previously not have considered doing so, and a very large number of these students now take up substantial part-time paid employment during their time as undergraduates. Whilst there are undoubted benefits to widening participation, it is clear that it may also have implications for student motivation. [140]

It would be naïve in the extreme to suggest that, in the past, all students who attended university were motivated purely by a love of learning; nevertheless, it is arguable that there has been a cultural change whereby the instrumental motivations for educational achievement and university attendance have become more explicit, and the spirit of traditional intellectual enquiry amongst the young has been compromised by media-led consumerism on a vast scale. Furthermore, there is little doubt that political interventions into the education system at all levels have increased the emphasis in education on assessment and results, at the possible expense of a concern with learning for its own sake. These factors are undoubtedly a challenge for teachers and lecturers at all levels, suggesting the need to re-evaluate what is appropriate and effective in terms of curriculum and pedagogy to ensure the engagement of students in the learning process (as Knights (2005) argues).

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[140] Childs (2005) comments on 'a reluctance amongst students to read outside the syllabus', suggesting that 'if sectors in HE become more vocationally driven, then students are more likely to perceive the worth of their degree in terms of the final classification, but recognising that 'it is the financial and career prospects on students that make it most difficult for many of them to see university as an opportunity to explore ideas for their own sake.' Knights (2005) comments that' as the higher education paradigm moves away from the all-absorbing social experience, the relation between the cultural lives of students inside and outside the academy will become crucial.' (p, 48)

Such engagement takes place within the discipline, however, and this study suggests a number of specific issues for the discipline that arise from questions of student attitude, centrally towards the activity of reading which forms the core of literary study. Whatever their motivations for participating in higher education, undergraduates reading English have made a choice to read English which suggests at least a degree of commitment to the subject – but what is the nature of that commitment?

Reading and literary value

It is a commonplace, especially at A Level, that students of English Literature should enjoy reading – a quality sometimes referred to as 'love of literature', sometimes as 'love of reading'. And yet, as my study has shown, the reality is more complicated. English teachers and lecturers, including those in my study, frequently question students' commitment to reading, and evidence from my study, as well as much other personal experience, suggests that many English students are not straightforwardly enthusiastic about the reading required for literature courses, even though they have opted to study literature. In any case, a very large proportion of the reading encountered on the first year course in my study was in fact non-literary, non-fictional – critical and theoretical: reading of a kind which most students had hardly encountered, at least in English, previously.

It seems clear that there is a network of issues here about what we mean when we talk about 'reading'/'literature' and 'love of reading'/'love of literature' in relation to literary study. As a starting point, it is, for instance, worth considering that many young people who love reading deliberately choose *not* to study literature for fear of compromising their enjoyment, and many of those who *do* choose to study literature say that they find their enjoyment compromised. Thus it is clear that a catch-all reference to 'love of reading' cannot be adequate to explain the dynamics of reading on the literature course.

It also clear that not all students who study literature can qualify as 'lovers of literature'. Many students' personal cultural choices, outside the formal study of literature, do not readily embrace the literary in the canonical sense that informs most literature courses. In many cases – including many of the students in my study – conventionally literary texts – especially poetic texts, but for some students even

recent prose fiction texts which have generally been validated as 'contemporary literature' (the kinds frequently studied, for instance, on A Level courses) – are only encountered by these students as objects of study rather than as elements of their own private cultural consumption, especially in a world where media, visual and popular culture are increasingly dominant, and where students' cultural consumption may be circumscribed by their need to work for money.

In fact, for many A Level English students, and some who go on to read English at university, it is clear that it is often the *study* of the texts – their elucidation in the classroom – which provides the *motivation* for the reading, rather than an intrinsic love of or interest in the texts outside the classroom. Because reading demands of this sort at A Level are manageable, however – only eight texts, with much of the critical groundwork done in class – students may embark on university courses expecting that this will suffice. This is not to say that these students may not *enjoy* the reading and study of the texts; presumably those who choose to read English at university have chosen it above other subjects because they find it interesting, though this may be regardless of whether they would define themselves as lovers of literature, or even of the texts they have studied.

Despite the fact that, for many students, the reading of set texts is an aspect of set text *study* rather than an independent pleasure in itself, lecturers in my data nevertheless reflected on the reluctance of students to enter into critical consideration of texts which might 'ruin' them or destroy their pleasure in them, and expressed a wish that students would 'theorise pleasure', as one put it, or that they might enjoy studying texts which are not immediately accessible or enjoyable to them *because of* the critical and intellectual endeavour involved. The same point is made by lecturers in Smith and Hopkins' (2005) survey. I also found evidence that students found it particularly hard to cope with the reading of texts whose style or mode was different from the straightforward representational mode that perhaps the majority of A Level texts adhere to: I am thinking here, for instance, of the sense of alienation students felt when reading *The Waste Land* and *Cloud Nine* – as well as the literary theory reader.

Perhaps this suggests that when many students express their love of reading, what they *actually* mean is that, to a limited extent, they find enjoyment in reading and studying certain set texts (perhaps of the relatively accessible type that tend to characterise A

Level texts), even if the texts are not texts that they would choose to read themselves, when set in the context of the kind of guided and relatively non-theoretical study which predominates at A Level. If this is the case, it is unsurprising that their 'love of reading' often does not manifest itself at university. [141]

It also suggests that the status of students – and teachers – as readers and critics themselves might need some explicit examination in the classroom. At A Level, students are often inducted into a mode of literary reading quite different from their own personal reading practices, and into a set of literary values – 'appreciation' – which may be quite different from their own; yet there is a sense in which it is assumed that these are natural for them, especially given the traditional lack of explicit focus on understanding the functions of literary criticism or theory. At university, this may be compounded by an assumption that the model of literary criticism is also a naturalised mode for them. In fact, students may need to be helped more formally to understand the relationship between their own cultural choices and the texts validated for literary study, both through a consideration of the nature and purposes of literary criticism as in many ways quite a separate activity from reading for pleasure (Knights (2005), Atherton (2005)), and through some consideration of the continuum of cultural choices from 'popular' to 'high,' and the ways in which this continuum is played out in society through, for instance, debates about literary discrimination and value.[142]

Reading and assessment

At issue here may be a rather complex process of student alienation from the processes of textual study which stems from a particular kind of dislocation between

[141] Green (2005) comments that 'if, in expressing their love of reading, as most students entering English degrees do, the exercise to which they refer is essentially different to the activity university courses demand of them, this is indeed a deep problem' (p. 277). Hopkins and Smith (2005) also comment on the tendency of prospective students to express their love of reading as a reason for wanting to study English, whilst suggesting that the reality is somewhat different.

[142] Such an explicit discourse of value, as the literature review shows, is something that distinguishes 'radical' from 'liberal' approaches to literature, and potentially allies literary studies with Media Studies. Bragg (2006) gives a fascinating account of one class explicitly confronting issues of cultural value in film study in which she argues that 'we need to be reflexive about students' knowledge of the valorised identities and supervisory discourses that circulate in the school', and to move from 'a text-centred to a more audience-centred' approach in order 'to achieve a more socially-located understanding' of text.

the idea of the text which is read for pleasure and the idea of the text which is studied in class. Evidence from my study suggests that students do not readily conceive of the life that set texts may have *outside the classroom,* or even outside the examination hall. Set texts may become 'reified' as objects which, on the one hand, are not part of 'the real world' because they do not reflect students' own cultural choices[143], and, on the other, are not part of the 'real world' because they are not securely intellectually imagined by them within a socio-cultural framework of the processes of cultural production and consumption: in other words, as texts that have or have had real readers in the real world outside the classroom, and which the activity of literary criticism places in the academy for specific academic purposes. As a result of the processes we have seen at work, set texts may for many become simply examination problems – and, since the link between literature and examination assessment for the purpose of the acquisition of qualifications is inevitably strong, students may thus be inclined to see literature as a privileged form which will give them access to qualifications and to cultural capital, but which is not connected with other forms of cultural experience.

The study of poetry provides perhaps the clearest example of this, in ways that were clearly demonstrated in my data, but also confirmed by a plethora of anecdotal evidence from classrooms and conversations. Lecturers expect students both to dislike and to be ignorant of poetry when they arrive at university, and they are usually right about both (although many students, for instance Billy in my project, will admit to liking First World War poetry – or at least, as Billy said, to have found the study of the texts enjoyable.) Because poetry (of the literary kind) tends not to feature in their own cultural choices, students often have very little sense of poetry as anything other than a verbal puzzle designed to be unpicked for assessment purposes; they are often unclear about the benefits of studying poetry beyond gaining a kind of cultural capital that will help them to pass an exam. They are often unclear about why poets write as they do, and who for – and this is not surprising, for most either dislike poetry or do not read it by choice, and yet are aware that teachers and lecturers probably feel that they should enjoy it and that it is in some way good for them – despite the fact that few

[143] Of course, one way of breaking this issue down is to include a wider range of cultural artefacts into the syllabus – as in Media Studies or Film Studies, for instance – though, as Bragg (2006) points out, this can be seen, for instance, as patronising if not handled carefully.

English teachers actually read poetry themselves for pleasure. The issue of whether literary study and the enjoyment of literature as a leisure pursuit are the same thing, or whether it is necessary to like poetry in order to study it, is rarely explicitly raised.

There are some fundamental confusions here which may be perpetuated by English at both school and university, and which strongly reflect historical debates about the nature and purpose of English Studies, notably the divisions between 'liberal' and 'radical' approaches which characterised much of the literature in my literature review.

Reading and literary analysis

A related issue concerns the different modes of reading and literary analysis which are dominant at A Level and in HE. A Level examiners frequently complain that A Level Literature students insist on addressing the 'trinity' of theme, character and plot in their analyses, rather than issues to do with literary form and language, and yet the format and structure of A Level Literature syllabuses and exam papers, with questions focused on the theme, narrative and characterisation within individual set texts, do little to foster such approaches to texts. HE lecturers, as for instance the lecturers in my study, frequently lament not only the lack of students' attention to language and form, but also their lack of interest in broad cultural analysis as distinct from a moral-aesthetic analysis of the internal fictive worlds of set texts.

Students' naturalised interest in the fictive worlds of the texts they study rather than in their textuality and literariness, or in broader questions of literary form and context – noted amongst the students in my study – is a legacy both of the Leavisite moral-aesthetic concerns which have so strongly influenced the teaching of English in schools and retain a strong influence in school literature teaching today, and of the concern with the encouragement of enjoyment and personal response in reading which characterises the teaching of literature in the pre-16 school curriculum. This tendency points again to the tensions, touched on above, that exist between the pursuit of reading as a leisure activity and the study of literature as an academic pursuit.

A number of issues emerging from my project can be seen to be at play here. First, there is the question of the relative role of primary and secondary texts in literary study at different phases. At A Level, as we have seen, there is a strong emphasis on the atomistic reading of single set literary texts in isolation from each other, and

students are unlikely to have been required to read literary criticism or to consider its purposes. There is a significant irony in that, despite being required to write analytical 'literary critical' essays, students are not generally required to read or study that form,[144] or to consider explicitly the role and purpose of literary criticism, There is also a crucial disjunction between the practice at A Level and the practice in higher education, where the ability to locate, assimilate and refer to a range of secondary critical material is considered fundamental, and there is an assumption that students have a notion of the function of criticism as distinct from the pursuit of reading as a leisure activity. In this regard, as we have seen, Marland (2003) comments on the tendency of the British system to neglect the teaching of the reading of secondary critical material and points to the problems this might cause in creating 'epistemological access' for students to disciplinary discourse.

Questions surrounding the teaching of literary theory are strongly connected with this issue. As in the course observed for this project, introductory literary theory modules – without careful mediation – may place too heavy demands on students who are likely to be inexperienced in the reading of even straightforward critical material, both in terms of the difficulty of the reading material involved and in terms of difficulty in locating the critical and conceptual mode of literary theory in relation to prior conceptions and personal experiences of the activity of reading and studying literature. Far from being a liberating tool, literary theory can become a canon of its own, as potentially unreceptive to students' authentic responses and concerns as the literary canon. The opportunities promised by literary theory can be squandered if its discourses are not made accessible to students from a starting point of what they already know and can do, and what they do not yet know and are unable yet to do. And there must be at least a question about whether the first year is a suitable location for a dedicated course in theory when students still have so much to learn about the history, scope and contexts of literature, and about their own relationship with literary study.

[144] Conversely, students are required to study *literary* texts, but rarely have the opportunity to *write* them.

Implications for pedagogy and curriculum – developing knowledge and skills

This network of issues around reading brings into relief both the gap that exists between the nature of literary study at A Level and in the university, and the complexity of attitudes, motivations and values which might characterise the experience of students and teachers in both phases. In both phases, it seems clear that students may need to be helped – through approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, which I explore in following sections – to see literature more clearly in relation to different cultural forms and different cultural levels and values, and to understand the nature and purposes of the discipline better in the light of these. Given the current situation at A Level, university faculties need to help students establish new rationales for their study, and to begin to develop a clear sense of the frameworks of their study. Broad concepts such as language, culture, art and discourse, production, reception and textuality, which provide frameworks for the understanding of difference in cultural forms, may offer them a route here, as well as attention to foundational elements of literary form and genre. Clarity about such matters might also help students to develop skills for independent, non-teacher-led critical reading. Dialogue between teachers in the secondary and tertiary phases would certainly also provide a productive way forward towards mutual understanding of the nature of the engagement which takes place in classrooms in both phases.

An extremely useful starting point for such dialogue might be McCormick's work (1994) on *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English,* a key text on theories of reading and, crucially, their curricular and pedagogical impact on students in the classroom. As I observed in the introduction, McCormick advocates more attention to a 'socio-cultural' (rather than 'expressive') model of reading in schools – in line with most university practice; but she also recognises that, in universities, such a model needs careful mediation through radical approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. She identifies three methods of bringing theory into the curriculum – 'canonising it, adding it on, and integrating it' (p. 179) – and advocates the third. 'The first two methods,' she comments, 'are the more common because they are more strongly rooted in institutional attitudes that pervade both our 'professional unconscious' and our classroom practice.' The third method places the emphasis on teaching students 'to

theorise' rather than teaching them 'theory,' and 'assumes a 'dialogic' classroom situation' (p. 176). [145]

McCormick's positions in many ways run parallel with the influential work of Gerald Graff (1992) on 'Teaching the Conflicts'. Writing of the need to make theoretical discourse accessible to students, he comments:

> Every literature teacher knows deep down that his students suspect… that what he does is "read into" texts meanings that are not really there. The process still seems vaguely like a trick even when the student learns to go through the motions well enough to get a good grade. I noted a moment ago that recent theorists like to argue that textual meaning is not natural but cultural, but for many students, textual meaning seems neither natural *nor* cultural, but *magical*. (p. 83)

Such mystification can be avoided, he argues, neither by pretending that theory does not exist, nor by 'assuming that students will learn to make these 'intellectual moves by being in the presence of [teachers] for several hours a week' (p. 75), but rather by inducting students openly and at an accessible level into 'the discourse community' of critics:

> It is easy to deplore Cliffs Notes as a prostitution of learning without recognising how dependent students become on such crutches when we fail to think through the problem of socialising them into the academic intellectual community. It is also easy to blind ourselves to the pedagogical lessons that Cliffs Notes might teach us… The producers of Cliff Notes know what educators often ignore, which is that most students need special help to produce a kind of literary-critical talk that is rarely spoken outside the literature class or the book review pages. (p. 76)

iii) Developing supportive curricula

As my literature review has shown, A Level and HE English curricula have developed along very different lines in recent decades, and the disjunction between these two types of curriculum, with their different structures and theoretical approaches, is one major cause of difficulty in post-16 transition in English. The development of mutually supportive curricula at both levels – curricula which take into account the needs and positions of teachers and students at both levels, and which reflect the need for

[145] Knights (2005) and Green (2007) both also discuss HE lecturers' resistance to dialogic modes of pedagogy which tend towards the 'productive' rather than the 'reproductive', and which require a re-thinking of the authority of the teacher.

greater coherence in students' experience of 'the cycle of English' from school to university – would be a very positive move.

At A Level, as we have seen, there are now moves towards an A Level English Literature curriculum which is in some ways more congruous with English as constituted at HE. New A Level specifications just published incorporate, for the first time, the requirement to study critical and theoretical writing to support set text study, as well as more explicit attention to foundational concepts such as narrative, genre and reception; they also emphasise setting set text study more firmly in the context of wider reading and contextual study. Nevertheless, the A Level curriculum is tightly controlled at a political level by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, and, whilst QCA has certainly consulted teachers in both phases about the A Level English curriculum, there is little sense in which this curriculum is decided through an extended process of discussion between expert representatives of the two phases; nor is there any move to establish such dialogue as part of a long-term process leading to eventual change.

In universities, each institution is free to determine its own curriculum, within the loose guidelines of the QAA Benchmark Statement, and there is thus more opportunity for English faculties to adjust their curricula in order to attempt to provide a suitable experience for those making the transition to HE. The first year course in many English faculties, as my data has exemplified, embraces a sense of induction into the discipline – perhaps through a literary theory course and a literary language course, as in my data, or perhaps more broadly through courses which introduce 'ways of reading' or ideas about genre. However, my data also suggest that in deciding on these curriculum structures and focuses, faculties would be wise to consider carefully the differences in the wider conceptual and theoretical frameworks and modes of learning which are dominant at the two phases. In particular, universities need to engage students through a curriculum which engages with theoretical frameworks at a level which is appropriate given the very limited experience of these which students are likely to have had at A Level; and a curriculum which attends explicitly to meta-cognitive issues such as students' understanding of the purposes and parameters of the discipline, their understanding of some of the foundational elements of literary knowledge and discourse, their grasp of the skills they need to develop and the

resources which are available to them, and the nature of their personal and cultural engagement with literature and literary study,

As I have noted, the English faculty I studied made a significant move in this direction in the year following my study, replacing courses in literary linguistics and literary theory with a disciplinary methods course and a genre-based course designed to equip students with a layer of foundational literary knowledge and skills broader than that provided by the A Level course and yet at a level more appropriate than that which the faculty had previously taken as a starting point. Such moves by individual universities, as well as general trends at A Level, are certainly moves in a positive direction, and yet more dialogue and closer relationships between the two phases would certainly clarify many of these issues. Whilst there is unlikely to be much development of this kind in the UK in the near future, there are examples of the creation of mutually supportive curricula through dialogue from other countries – in Australia for instance – which could provide models for this kind of work.

Models from Australia and the United States

It is difficult to generalise about the Australian experience, as every state has its own education system. However, during the 1990s, in the context of these reforms, significant and progressive change to the advanced literature curriculum took place throughout Australia. This reform took place in the context of a strong tradition of radical approaches to the teaching of literature (and texts in general) in Australia, inspired by the strong critical literacy movement there.

These changes have tended to be not only structural, but also ideologically explicit in relation to modern theoretical approaches to literary study, involving a systematic programme of teacher re-education. Beavis (1995; 1997; 2001) gives an account of the substantial difficulties encountered (and largely surmounted) by teachers in the state of Victoria engaging with the process of moving from a system very similar to that of the existing A Level, where teachers are often seen as occupying the position of 'preachers of culture,' to one in which a more democratic engagement with texts is central. Despite these difficulties, she argues (1995) that there were pressing reasons for this process – all of which are as relevant to the UK as they are to Australia. First, the changing nature of the school population in senior forms demands that the curriculum recognises a greater diversity of cultural backgrounds and literacy needs in students, as

well as the revolution which has taken place in students' cultural and textual experiences and values. Second, the increasing complexity of textuality and communication in society demands that the curriculum provides a more modern approach in order to equip students with an adequate understanding of the role of language and texts in society. Thirdly, the changed nature of the subject English in higher education, after literary theory, requires the secondary subject to shift from its traditional positions.

Key to these developments has been the influential role of university faculties of Education in shaping state curricula and qualifications. Faculties of Education, English, and Cultural Studies – often working together - have been highly influential in shaping progressive curricula in schools based on conceptions of critical literacy and literary theory, and in training teachers to teach using new methods and concepts common at HE - for instance in the areas of textuality, representation and canon formation. Perhaps most interesting about this model is the way in which the role of the faculty of Education emerges as a potentially strong focus for mediation between schools and the world of university English – in a context where faculties of Education have some considerable influence over curriculum formation (which they do not in the UK.)

The United States also provides a model of curriculum formation which has led to valuable collaboration between schools and universities. In a country where there are no centralised curricula at post-16 level, many schools have developed approaches informed by critical literacy and literary theory, and possibilities for collaboration with universities at a local level are considerable. In *The Rise and Fall of English* (1998), for instance, Robert Scholes, professor of English at Brown University, gives an account (pp. 128-142) of an advanced literature course developed by him in collaboration with teachers, based on the concepts of voice and culture, in which the modules are "Voices of Modern Cultures", "Encountering the Other, Being the Other", "Cultures and Voices in a Single Text", "Inheriting Earlier Voices", "Film, Language and Culture", and "Mediating Culture – the Representation of Events and People." The titles of the units fully express the accessible way in which a theoretical framework is used to shape the course in a radically different way from the conventional set-text based literature course, and gives an indication of a possible model for a Sixth Form literature study which could help to bring about greater coherenec with university study.

iv) Developing strategies for teaching and learning

Student engagement in learning stems not only from curriculum structures and their underpinning theoretical frameworks but also from the nature of the pedagogical engagement which takes place in the classroom and of the learning activities with which the curriculum is accessed.

My literature review and the data in my study, as well as much anecdotal evidence, suggest that A Level Literature is sometimes characterised by a form of teacher guidance – frequently referred to as spoon-feeding (e.g. Smith and Hopkins, 2005) – which can create a comfortable environment but which can constrain the development of independent study skills and narrow the scope of students' engagement with and grasp of the subject. Further, the lack of explicit attention at A Level to issues concerning the multiplicity of interpretation and cultural value, the production and reception of texts, and the nature of the voices of critics and writers, can lead to what Mitchell (1994) has characterised as a 'collective subjectivity' which does not easily allow examination or development of students' personal critical voices, the development of personal rationales for study, or the placing of literature and literary study within a broad cultural continuum which links to the real world of students' own cultural lives and the lives that texts have outside the classroom.

At the point of transition to university, students may find themselves moving from such a position of relative dependency to one in which, as my study has shown, teacher contact and guidance, and the scope for exploratory discussion in class, are drastically reduced, whilst they are offered a *carte blanche* of complex critical positions from which to choose, without ever being given the opportunity to engage with or assimilate the first principles of critical discourse. Whilst A Level may *neglect* students' personal voices and positions, university English may *assume* their existence, thereby neglecting them further.

This does not mean that English faculties, and individual lecturers, do not deploy a range of strategies to seek students' engagement. For instance, in the course from which my data are drawn, the construction of the literary theory module was such that the study of a set text one week would be followed by the study of a literary theory

the next week, so that students could – in theory - experience the application of a theory to a text they know. Lecturers also frequently deployed group discussion and feedback within seminars in order to encourage the participation of all students in discussion. In practice, however, these strategies often did not work effectively because they had bypassed certain more fundamental issues, notably the extent to which the agenda for discussion and learning had been restricted either explicitly by the lecturer or more generally by a network of issues such as lecturers' assumptions about students' conceptual understanding, restricted classroom time, and rigid course structures, in such a way as to preclude addressing students' concerns and actual learning needs. As Green (2006) argues (p. 281):

> Perceptions of what constitutes subject knowledge tend to be heavily content-based. However, effective teaching knowledge depends on more than content knowledge alone. It depends, for example, on the ability to make texts accessible to a variety of students and to ensure the development of discipline-specific skills…. Theoretically robust subject knowledge incorporates not only cognitive content but also the sociological, transactional, political and pedagogical principles that underpin interaction between lecturers and students.

Developing student voice and learning

Perhaps the most significant issue here is the need for students' voices to be heard as a starting point for discussion, as a means of setting the agenda for learning. One of the most memorable moments of the course I followed was at the beginning of the third term (the second term of the literary theory module) when the new lecturer (who had replaced the lecturer who taught the first term of the module) asked the students in the class to talk in pairs about their thoughts and feelings about the set text which they had just studied, and to report back with any burning questions or comments they had. This was in fact the very first time in the module when students had been asked to give an open response to a text, without the agenda for discussion being set by the lecturer. The sense of surprise and excitement amongst the students was almost tangible, and the issues they raised opened up a range of highly pertinent issues at a level of discourse which reflected and revealed the level of their understanding and response, providing a starting point for the lecturer to build on, and a basis for dialogue.[146]

[146] A basic example of McCormick's 'dialogic classroom' in which students are taught to 'theorise' rather than being taught 'theory'.

Unfortunately, this strategy was not repeated. Admittedly, the very restricted seminar time made it difficult for the lecturer to take this relatively slow approach to curriculum coverage; however, it is difficult to see how curriculum coverage can be successful if it does not take into account the need for students to reveal their understandings through dialogue, and assimilate the concepts and practise the discourses of the discipline through testing their responses against the more experienced voice of the lecturer, who can then model the application of discourses and concepts to initial response.

Active reading, critical literacy, constructivism

The development of student voice and the induction of students into the discourses of the discipline may come not only from explicit text-based discussion and a measured approach to students' assimilation of literary concepts, but also, as suggested earlier, from the development of students' understanding of the cultural landscape of which literary texts and literary study form a part, and of their own personal positions and voices within that landscape.

Here aspects of critical literacy and cultural studies, such as the production and reception of texts, and the notion of representation, are significant – and yet these concepts were not introduced to students during the course I followed, and had not been introduced to them at A Level. Evidence from my data suggested that students had some difficulty in imagining the conditions of some literary and critical texts' production and consumption, perhaps seeing them merely as objects for study within the classroom rather than as works of art or politics with a life away from the education system in which 'real' writers worked to communicate meaning in society through literary craft and 'real' readers worked to extract meaning in society through interpretation. Yet the ability to create such a critical distance from texts is surely a pre-requisite for understanding the role of the critic, and for accessing the cultural, political, linguistic and aesthetic discourses of literary criticism which are central to the modern discipline – what Robert Scholes identifies as 'textual power'. A commendable attempt to equip students with such 'power' was made in the first module of the first year course I followed – a language of literature module – but its potential was not followed up in the literary theory module which followed.

Such distance may also emerge from the active engagement of students in the production of text in order to produce learning. It is notable that literature students at both levels are rarely encouraged to practise the production of literary texts themselves and thus to become directly engaged with the craft and motivations of the writer in order to step back and see text from different perspectives. Knights and Thurgar-Dawson (2006) and Pope (2000) currently lead the field in advocating 'active reading' approaches through creative writing and 'textual intervention,' techniques which in fact reflect creative practices that have been used in the lower years of the secondary school in literature teaching for several decades, and are now also common in the A Level English Language and Literature course (and shortly to be introduced widely into the A Level Literature course.)

Knights and Thurgar-Dawson seek to locate their work on 'active reading' techniques in a constructivist strand of thought in English Studies, suggesting that it was to constructivist pedagogies to which HE turned in the 1970s to address pedagogical problems in HE English:

> Those who were most dissatisfied with the state of learning in English Studies were drawn towards practices which were inherently constructivist. Seeing a profound analogy between the processes of writing and the process of learning, they were drawn towards accounts of learning which foregrounded the processes (intellectual, affective and social) in which students engage in order to learn. (p. 34)

In this tradition, they argue, 'the refreshment of the subject is seen as likely to be generated not simply, or even at all, from the scholarly generation of knowledge, but from the reinvigoration of the transactions between student, teacher and text' (p.35).

Burgess (2007) also reflects on the influence of constructivism in secondary English, conversely suggesting that:

> The methodologies developed in the various writing programmes of the 1970s and 80s have seemed to some to be too informal in their underpinning linguistic theory and to pay too little regard to incorporating instruction of certain kinds.(p. 30)

But he reaffirms the importance for English of Vygotsky's focus on 'the work the students do, in order to internalise and to appropriate the skills that planners are seeking to develop':

> Within Vygotskyan theory, there are powerful reminders of the curriculum as a means and not an end. It reminds us, as teachers, that in the moment of instruction, however clearly directed towards outcomes, the concepts and skills initiated are only at the beginning of their journey. From the interactions of the classroom, it is the travel of instruction – and its intersection with wider patterns of intellectual, emotional and cognitive transformation – that Vygotsky demonstrates to the curriculum planners.

In this convergence of secondary and HE perspectives, there is perhaps some hope for future cross-phase developments in the relationships between curriculum and pedagogy in both A Level and university English Studies.

4 . Researching transition

Contribution of the project

In carrying out this research, I hope to have made a significant contribution to understanding of the experience of transition between English A Level and English in higher education – an experience about which, until recently, very little research evidence existed. A great deal has been written about the conflicting paradigms for literary study at the two levels, as I have shown in my literature review, and this, as I have also shown, has been supplemented recently by data from questionnaires (Green, 2005a) and interviews (Smith and Hopkins, 2005), each of these taking a 'snapshot' approach and gathering data from a range of institutions. This project, however, I hope contributes uniquely to the available evidence through adopting a case-study approach which follows one case over an extended period of time, and a multi-layered approach to the case study, combining student interviews, lecturer interviews and researcher observations. Thus, it brings multiple perspectives – those of students, lecturers and researcher – to bear on the same phenomenon, commenting on developments and patterns emerging over time, and allowing insights not only into disciplinary tensions, but also into the way these are actualised in the classroom through pedagogy and curriculum. Of these various layers – although the triangulation between layers is vital to the project – perhaps the most significant layer in terms of the contribution of the

project is that of classroom and lecture-theatre observation in HE English, as only one very small-scale account of this (Jones et al, 2005) is currently available.

Any study of the phenomenon of educational transition must anticipate that, having deposited evidence in the research bank, that evidence will be of value to those working in the phases affected by the transition. This project will, I hope, be of value not only because of the depth of the account provided by its case study approach, but also because of its particular emphasis on the relationship between the two phases. A recent pilot study, carried out by lecturers in higher education (Jones et al., 2005), uses data from first year university English seminars in order to explore how the university discipline is constructed through teacher-student interaction. My project also uses data from first year university English seminars; its focus, however, is specifically on what we can learn from these interactions about the relationship between the secondary and higher phases, and the transition between them. But, further, one of its particular contributions is in applying the perspective of a teacher-researcher associated with one phase to the observation and analysis of the other phase.[147]

In the world of the transition between A Level and university, it is rare for the A Level teacher to be privy to undergraduate lectures and seminars, and it is rare for the HE lecturer to be privy to the A Level class. Yet, given the recognised difficulties that exist between the two phases, and the historical lack of communication between them, cross-phase observation and dialogue would seem to be highly desirable if progress is to be made. My perspective as an A Level teacher, as well as a researcher, has undoubtedly given my analyses a particular inflection, helping me not only to see higher education practice through an A Level lens, but also to reflect on A Level practice in the light of the undergraduate experience. This project, then, perhaps not only provides interesting research data, but also a model for future collaboration between the phases.

[147] Ballinger, a university lecturer, conducts an extremely small-scale observation and analysis of a few A Level lessons (2002), whilst Mitchell (1994a; b) follows one student from A Level to university, again in a very small-scale study. A further interesting perspective is that of the FE college in which teachers teach English at both A Level and university level. Apart from an account by Smith (2002), there is little written about this.

A model for collaboration?

It might be argued that this model of cross-phase research produces not only a valuable research perspective, but also a model for cross-phase development and collaboration which could be repeated in professional rather than academic situations. Throughout the time that I have been working on this project, I have been involved with a number of groups, projects and institutions working in the area of cross-phase liaison – NATE's Post-16 Committee, the 14-19 English Reform Group, the English Subject Centre, the Common English Forum, QCA's *English 21* – through which and at which I have been able to disseminate some ideas relating to my research in contexts which have been of considerable interest to policy-making groups and individuals, as well as other teachers in both sectors. I have also had a number of interesting opportunities, for instance with PGCE students at Homerton College, and with 'gifted and talented' A Level students at Villiers Park Educational Trust, to experiment with teaching ideas informed by the research. It is, perhaps, therefore, not a forlorn hope that some of the ideas presented here will bear fruit outside the covers of this submission and of academic journals.

Although it perhaps promises much as a model for cross-phase collaboration, this research project has not been without difficulty with regard to cross-phase relations. I have been acutely conscious throughout that my decision to produce a commentary on the work of a university English faculty, rather than an A Level Literature department, has inevitably led me to dwell perhaps unduly on some of the shortcomings of English in HE. Had I chosen the alternative course, I would doubtless have found equal quantities to complain about in A Level classrooms. As it is, I have attempted to highlight the equal responsibility of the A Level course for the difficulties of transition between school and university English, drawing conclusions wherever possible about the A Level experience from my data. This issue does, however, draw attention to the practical sensitivities of cross-phase critique, and suggests the need for such work to be accompanied and followed up with positive dialogue.

Directions for future research

One of the key issues emerging from this study is that of the attitudes, motivations and values with which students and lecturers approach literary study. This study has only been able to suggest some broad themes with regard to this issue and, as I found, it is not always easy to formulate research instruments which draw students productively

into this discourse. I feel sure that further research into this area – in particular into the ways in which students are constructed as readers and critics and the ways in which students understand and assimilate the content of literary courses in relation to their own cultural choices – would be most interesting.

There are several other areas which my research has not been able to cover but which are likely to yield valuable complementary data if further research is carried out. Perhaps most pressing of all is the need to produce accounts of *A Level Literature* classrooms in action, and more detailed accounts of the attitudes and perceptions of A Level teachers and students in relation to the A Level course, as hardly any such accounts exist. In the realm of university classrooms, Jones et al (2005) are currently working on a comparative project examining the production of English in a number of universities. This project is valuably comparative and focused on very close readings of a small number of seminars; the scope is quite intimate, and does not incorporate the examination of teachers and classes over time as my research has done. Conversely, a limitation of my research – because of its longitudinal focus on one class – is that it is restricted to one class in one institution. My findings could be richly complemented by similar studies at other universities, or by a larger-scale longitudinal study.

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This thesis is prefaced by a quotation from Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* (2004), in which Bennett, with a number of ironies, has the Headmaster suggest that the English teacher, Hector, 'opened', for his pupils, 'an account in the bank of literature' and made them 'shareholders in that wonderful world of words'. Hector, of course, would never have thought of what he did in such terms; nevertheless the remark reflects the way in which, as the play suggests, learning is inevitably compromised by the institutional realities of the education system. It is my hope that the content of this thesis illuminates the ironies of the Headmaster's statement, in perhaps more complex ways than the play immediately suggests, through its investigation of the network of motivations, attitudes and values which constitute and underlie teaching and learning about literature in schools and universities.

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APPENDIX: DOCUMENTS AND TRANSCRIPTS

1. Data summary

2. Description of course

3. Information sheets and questionnaires distributed to whole class

4. Information sheet, consent form and data related to selection of focus group

5. Interview schedules

6. Selected interview and seminar transcripts
    i) Seminar, Term Two, Week Seven
    ii) Seminar, Term Two, Week Eight
    iii) First interview with Richard (lecturer), Term One
    iv) First interview with Julie (lecturer), Term Two
    v) Second interview with Julie (lecturer), Term Two
    vi) First focus group interview, Term One
    vii) Focus group: Individual interviews, Term Two – Billy
    viii) Focus group: Individual interviews, Term Two – Matt

1: Data Summary

selected transcripts in appendix shown in bold

Term One: Language, Literature, Discourse I

**Written notes on all lectures and seminars – two lectures, one seminar each week*
**Analogue recordings of all seminars and interviews from Week Two onwards*

Week One
Lecture Introduction – varieties of English, kinds of text
Seminar Introduction – introducing ourselves and the course
Lecture Speech and Writing: structures and functions

Week Two
Lecture Analysing poetry – old and new (I)
Seminar Discoursing about speech
Lecture Sound-patterning in and out of poetry

Week Three
Lecture Grammatical analysis
Seminar Basic structures – sound
Lecture Further grammatical and sound structures
Questionnaire to all students

Week Four
Lecture Imagery, metaphor and the making of meaning
Seminar Basic structures – grammar
Lecture 'New" Englishes: language and identity
First interview with Richard (lecturer) – transcript in appendix

Week Five
Lecture Analysing poetry – old and new (II)
Seminar Imagery: metaphor and meaning
Technical time test
First focus group interview – transcript in appendix

Week Six
Lecture Persona and performance
Seminar Language, identity, performance
Lecture Analysing prose; answers to time test
Second focus group interview

Week Seven: One-to-one presentation

Week Eight
Lecture Putting it all together (I) – same texts, different approaches
Seminar Student agenda – trouble-shooting, analysis practice
Lecture Putting it all together (II) – student questions and suggestions for discussion
Third focus group interview; Second interview with Richard (lecturer)

Terms Two and Three: Texts, Problems and Approaches

* *Written notes on all lectures and seminars* **-** one lecture and seminar each week
* *Digital recordings of all seminars and interviews except T3W4 seminar (recording missing)*

T2W1 Introduction – how close can a reading be?
T2W2 Formalisms

T2W3 Eliot: The Waste Land
T2W4 Structuralism
T2W4 Focus Group: Alison, Debbie, Lizzie group interview

T2W5 Shakespeare: Othello (1st assignment due)
T2W6 Literature and Politics
T2W6 Focus Group: Billy and Matt individual interviews – transcripts in appendix
T2W6 First interview with Julie – transcript in appendix

T2W7 Churchill: Cloud Nine – *transcript in appendix*
T2W8 Feminism – *transcript in appendix*
T2W8 Second interview with Julie (lecturer) – transcript in appendix

T3W1 Shelley: Frankenstein
T3W2 The Novel and Discourse

T3W3 Eliot: Mill on the Floss
T3W4 Gender – *recording missing*

T3W5 Morrison: The Bluest Eye (2nd assignment due)
T3W5 Focus Group: Alison, Debbie, Lizzie group interview
T3W5 Additional individual interviews with Mary and Helen, mature students
T3W6 Black Writing

T3W7 *Bank holiday*
T3W8 Exam preparation
T3W9 Focus Group: Luke and Robbie group interview
T3 W9 Focus Group: Lucy individual interview

2. Description of Course
with extracts from prospectus and handbook

The Prospectus

Students' first concrete ideas about the English Studies course at --- are likely to come from the undergraduate prospectus, the introduction of which states:

> In English Studies we emphasise critical understanding of the ways in which texts come into being and can be analysed. We will introduce you to different critical approaches, and show you how to recognise and challenge the ways in which power relations, in such areas as sexuality, gender, ethnicity and class, are constructed and perpetuated in English language, literature and culture. Not only do you have the opportunity to read an exciting range of texts: you think about how you read, and how others have read, and you assess the usefulness of different approaches while working out your own.

The Student Handbook

The first year ('Stage One') of the course consists of two compulsory modules, 'Language, Literature, Discourse I' and 'Texts, Problems and Approaches.' Stage One, the Student Handbook tells the students, 'introduces you to 'literature' as a type of verbal activity which is continuous with yet in some respects distinct from all the other things people do with language.' It goes on to explain that:

> 'Literature' thus conceived is not so much a thing in its own right, but rather a set of distinctive practices and discourses. Literature is also a peculiarly pleasurable and powerful activity: it involves a material-aesthetic interest in the play of language and life itself. In order to explore these practices/discourses and peculiar pleasures and powers for yourself, there is a considerable emphasis on doing things with and to language, as well as analysing it. In this way you experience and experiment with the category 'literature' as something in part made (by you) as well as given (by others).

The first term module, 'Language, Literature, Discourse I', the handbook says, 'constitutes an introduction to a wide range of relatively short texts, and to ways of analysing and intervening in them.' In the second module, 'Texts, Problems and Approaches,' 'you go on to explore and analyse related clusters of longer texts.' The handbook adds that:

> Over the year, you will be introduced to a range of contemporary theoretical frameworks and critical approaches. These will help you formulate your own critical position and develop your own textual strategies.

More specific guidance on each module offers additional information. The first module is:

> An introduction to the terms and techniques of detailed textual analysis. There is an emphasis on a variety of Englishes in a variety of social, historical and cultural contexts, and particular attention to varieties of contemporary poetry.

The module aims to develop:

1. A good sense of how language – particularly the English language – is structured and how it is used.
2. Awareness of a rich variety of Englishes (historically, geographically and socially, distinguished by form, function and medium).
3. Practical understanding of the relevant models of communication, discourse and sign-theory.
4. A handy kit of terms and techniques to describe varieties of English: in speech and writing, in live conversation and the media, in literary and non-literary texts.
5. The confidence to challenge and change any stretch of language, and thereby show up its distinctive strategies and structures.

The 'overall aim' of the module, the guidance states, 'may be summed up as development of your analytical, critical and creative capacities, and enhanced awareness of language and literature – especially kinds of English language and literature – as sources of pleasure and resources of power.'

The second module is 'a course which integrates the study of clusters of related literary texts with the study of some contemporary critical approaches.' The module aims to develop:

1. An acquaintance with a range of literary texts from widely differing periods, and an understanding of the principles behind their construction, both the apparently internal principles and those more obviously dependant *(sic)* on historical circumstances.
2. An understanding of a range of theoretical and critical approaches, and the power to discriminate between their respective advantages and disadvantages, and between their fundamental standpoints.
3. The ability to apply these theories and approaches to the set literary texts appropriately and productively.

Module Handbooks

Term One – the first module
Term dates: 29th September – 5th December)

The Module Handbook for the first module gives further detail about the intended learning outcomes, suggesting that by the end of the module, students 'should have:

(a) acquired awareness of a variety of 'Englishes', distinguished historically, geographically and socially, as well as by form, function and medium
(b) enhanced your understanding and enjoyment of poetry in a wide range of traditions and genres, 'classic' and contemporary, including the critical interpretation and linguistic analysis of poetry from a specific region outside Britain (the Caribbean)
(c) studied the basic constructional principles of the English language in both written and oral, literary and non-literary forms
(d) considered some of the ways in which language is used to define and manipulate who we are and our place in society
(e) recognised the main dynamic features of language, including its variety and instability.

and that they 'should be able to:

a) describe varieties of English wherever and whenever you may meet them – in speech and writing, in live conversation and the media, in literary and other texts – using a handy kit of terms and techniques

b) analyse poetic and other texts singly and comparatively on the basis of this technical description
c) describe the rhetorical techniques used to construct our ideas of the world in language

The module takes place each Monday afternoon between 3pm and 6pm, each afternoon consisting of one hour of lecture, one hour of class seminar, and a final hour of lecture. The schedule specifies the following topics:

Week		
1	29 Sept	Lecture: Introduction: varieties of English, kinds of text Seminar: Introducing ourselves and the course Lecture: Speech and writing: structures and functions
2	6 Oct	Lecture: Analysing poetry – old and new (i) Seminar: Discoursing about speech Lecture: Sound-patterning in and out of poetry
3	13 Oct	Lecture: Grammatical analysis Seminar: Basic structures: sound Lecture: Further grammatical and sound structures
4	20 Oct	Lecture: Imagery, metaphor and the making of meaning Seminar: Basic structures: grammar Lecture: 'new' Englishes: language and identity
5	27 Oct	Lecture: Analysing poetry – old and new (ii) Seminar: Imagery: metaphor and meaning (No lecture – technical time test – poetry in practice.)
6	3 Nov	Lecture: Persona and performance Seminar: Language, identity, performance Lecture: Answers to time test; analysing prose
7	10 Nov (No lectures or classes – one-to-one presentations.)	
8	17 Nov	Putting it all together (i) Staff forum – same texts, different approaches Seminar: Student agenda: trouble-shooting, analysis practice Putting it all together (ii) Student questions and suggestions for Discussion. Course evaluation

The text books for the course are Rob Pope: *The English Studies Book*, David Crystal: *Rediscover Grammar* and *The Heinemann Book of Caribbean Verse.*

Terms Two and Three: Second Module
Term dates: 12th Jan – 19th March & 19th April – 25th June

The module handbook states that the aim of the course is 'to integrate the study of literary texts with the study of contemporary critical and theoretical approaches' covering 'the three main literary genres: poetry, prose and fiction (the novel), and drama' and to 'introduce students to both 'theory' and theoretical approaches to the study of literature.' It continues:

> Each of the set literary texts will be viewed in the light of general critical questions and considered in relation to a set of problems raised by questions of form, genre and history, as well as to cultural and political contexts. In enabling students to gain some experience of literary texts from different historical periods, the course is designed to complement and extend the introduction to literary study offered by [Module One] and provide a preview of the range of courses offered in Stage 2 of the English Studies programme.

It suggests that by the end of the course students should have acquired:

i) an acquaintance with a range of literary texts from differing periods and cultural contexts
ii) an understanding of their construction, that is, both the apparently internal principles of the shape and genre of the work, and those factors more obviously dependent on historical circumstances
iii) an understanding of a range of theoretical and critical approaches to literary texts

and that by the end of the module students should be able to:

i) describe the main conventions and constructional features of the literary set texts both alone and, where required, by contrast and comparison
ii) describe a range of critical and theoretical approaches and discriminate between their fundamental standpoints and between their respective advantages and disadvantages
iii) apply these theories and approaches to the set literary texts appropriately and productively

The handbook gives further guidance on critical theory, explaining that the module will 'begin to introduce you to some of the major critical approaches which have been brought to the study of literary texts in the past 50 or so years' and continues:

These include some generically related ideas, like dialogism in the novel, but also major political, theoretical and philosophical trends, including feminism, gender studies, and structuralism. By the end of the course, you should be familiar with the basic ideas underlying these approaches and have a developed sense of the potential applicability of some of those ideas to the literary set texts. The key aim is to broaden your awareness of the ways in which it is possible to read texts, and to make you more self-conscious about the bases of your own reading practices when approaching texts from a range of backgrounds, and with a range of literary characteristics

It also asks students to note that:

> a) No reading of a text is 'innocent' or 'neutral' – it involves presumptions even when discussing issues of form, genre and historical or literary context. Therefore, even when discussing the literary text 'straightforwardly' in the first week of each segment, the presumptions behind the reading offered in the lecture and seminar will be spelt out
>
> b) Although the critical approaches are introduced in connection with single texts, of course they are applicable to other texts on the course.

The module takes place each Monday afternoon between 2 and 4pm, each session consisting of a lecture followed by a seminar. Teaching takes place in 2-week segments,

with the first week devoted to discussion of a literary text and the second week introducing a critical approach in relation to that text. The schedule is as follows:

Term Two		
Week 1	12 Jan	Introductory lecture: how 'close' can a 'close reading' be? Introductory seminar: 'My Last Duchess' (Browning)
Week 2	19 Jan	Formalisms
Week 3	26 Jan	T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land
Week 4	2 Feb	Structuralism
Week 5	9 Feb	Shakespeare: Othello
Week 6	10 Feb	Literature and Politics
Week 7	17 Feb	Caryl Churchill: Cloud Nine
Week 8	24 Feb	Feminism
Term Three		
Week 1	19 Apr	Mary Shelley: Frankenstein
Week 2	26 Apr	The Novel and Discourse
Week 3	3 May	George Eliot: the Mill on the Floss
Week 4	10 May	Gender
Week 5	17 May	Toni Morrison: The Bluest Eye
Week 6	24 May	Black Writing
Week 7	31 May	No lecture (bank holiday)
Week 8	7 June	Exam preparation / sample paper

The text book for the course is Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan: *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Peter Barry: *Beginning Theory* is also recommended.

3. Information Sheets And Questionnaires Distributed To Whole Class

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i) Information Sheet, Term One

A Level English Literature and English Studies at University

PhD research project conducted by Gary Snapper, Institute of Education, University of London

Throughout this year, I will be following first year English Studies classes at --- as part of my research project, in which I am investigating the way A Level English Literature prepares students for the study of English at university. I have been an English teacher – and Head of English – at two state comprehensive schools in Cambridge for the last 14 years, and became interested in issues to do with the way teachers, students and the people who write syllabuses and make government policies think about literature. I want to find out more about what people think is valuable about literary study, and how their ideas about literature change as a result of teaching and learning about it. I am also interested in what kind of values people ascribe to literature, for instance, compared with other types of culture, and what kinds of messages students receive about these values at school and at university.

In the first term, I will follow your class. During classes I will observe what's happening, make notes, and possibly tape recordings too. I will be watching how the interaction between teacher and students produces ideas and changes understandings. Later in the term, I will be asking a group of you to help me by discussing the course and your thoughts about it with me. Also at a later stage, I would like to interview some of you to find out more about your schools, A Level courses, and reasons for studying literature. After I have found out some basic facts about all the students in the group through a questionnaire, and observed the class for a few weeks, I will approach some of you to invite you to take part in these activities. You will not have to take part if you do not want to. However, I would obviously be very grateful for your help, and you may even find the activities helpful for your studies by helping you to think about what you are learning.

I will be discussing the course and what happens in the classes with Prof --- and other lecturers as well as with you. What you say to me in these discussions will remain confidential and will not in any way affect your results or progress. I will not discuss information about individual students with any member of the English department in such a way that individuals could be identified by name. When I write my PhD thesis, I will want to quote things that people have said either in class or in discussions with me. These quotations will be anonymised, so that the real names of teachers and students do not appear.

If at any time, any of you has any concerns about the research project, you should feel free to discuss them with me or Prof. ---. If you feel that you have particular ideas about your experiences of studying English either at A Level or now that you would like to tell me, do approach me.

In this first class, I would be grateful if you would all fill in a brief questionnaire. Your responses will be confidential, and will help me to begin to understand the kind of experiences you have had before coming to ---. However, you do not have to fill in the questionnaire if you do not want to. *GS September 2003*

ii) Information Sheet, Term Two

A Level English Literature and English Studies at University

PhD research project conducted by Gary Snapper, Institute of Education, University of London

Throughout this year, I am following first year English Studies classes at --- as part of my research project, in which I am investigating the way A Level English Literature prepares students for the study of English at university. I have been an English teacher – and Head of English – at two state comprehensive schools in Cambridge for the last 14 years, and became interested in issues to do with the way teachers, students and the people who write syllabuses and make government policies think about literature. I want to find out more about what people think is valuable about literary study, and how their ideas about literature change as a result of teaching and learning about it. I am also interested in what kind of values people ascribe to literature, for instance, compared with other types of culture, and what kinds of messages students receive about these values at school and at university.

In the first term, I followed Prof. ---'s class, and this term I will be following Dr ---'s class. During classes I will observe what's happening, make notes, and possibly tape recordings too. I will be watching how the interaction between teacher and students produces ideas and changes understandings. I have also been working with a group of students, some of whom are in this class, to look at some of these issues in more detail, and I will continue to work with this group throughout the year.

I will be discussing the course and what happens in the classes with Dr --- and other lecturers as well as with students. What students and teachers say to me in these discussions will remain confidential and will not in any way affect your results or progress. I will not discuss information about individual students with any member of the English department in such a way that individuals could be identified by name. When I write my PhD thesis, I will want to quote things that people have said either in class or in discussions with me. These quotations will be anonymised, so that the real names of teachers and students do not appear.

If at any time, any of you has any concerns about the research project, you should feel free to discuss them with me, Prof. --- or Dr ---. If you feel that you have particular ideas about your experiences of studying English either at A Level or now that you would like to tell me, do approach me.

GS January 2004

iii) Questionnaire, Term One

English Studies Questionnaire: Part One

N.B. All information on this sheet will remain confidential and will not be divulged to anyone else. In some parts of this questionnaire I ask about your educational and social background. This is because part of my research project looks at the ways in which people from different backgrounds think and feel about studying English. I will be grateful if you complete all questions, but you do not have to.

A. Basic information about yourself

1. Your name ……

2. Your age …….. yrs ……months

3. Your sex *(Please circle one.)* Female Male

4. Your ethnic origin (*Please circle one or more*)
White Asian Black Other (please specify……)

5. Your nationality ……..

6. Your parents' occupation(s) ……..

B. *Information about your educational background*

1. At which school or college did you study A Levels (or an equivalent) before coming to --- ?

Name of school / college……

Town or City…….

County……

2. What kind of institution is that? (*Please circle one.)*

Comprehensive school State grammar school Sixth form college
Tutorial college Independent school International school
Other (please specify: ……..)

3. If you did not study A Levels, please explain what you did before coming to --- .

……

……

4. Which A Levels or AS Levels did you study, and what grades did you achieve in them?

……

……

……

5. If you did <u>not</u> come straight from school or college to university, please say what you have done in between, and how long for.

……

……

……

6. Did either of your parents go to university? *(Please circle one)*

One Both Neither

7. If either of your parents went to university, please state what they studied.

……..……

English Studies Questionnaire: Part Two

I would be grateful if you would take this second part of the questionnaire away with you and return it to me at the class next week. These questions require you to have some time to reflect on your answers, and I hope they will help you to think about what you are doing in your study of literature. Some questions ask about your cultural tastes and values. It is essential that you answer honestly! Your answers will remain confidential.

Feel free to answer the questions on a separate sheet of paper if you would prefer to write in more detail, and to give any other information which you think might be relevant.

C. Information about your study of literature

1. Please explain briefly why you chose to do an English Studies course

2. Please explain briefly why you chose to study at --- .

3. Please describe briefly your thoughts and feelings about A Level English Literature. What aspects of the course, if any, did you find particularly interesting or valuable? What aspects, if any, did you find challenging or frustrating? Why did you choose it?

4. Please describe briefly your thoughts and feelings about the English Studies course at --- . What are you looking forward to, or anxious about? What are you hoping to get from the course? How have you found it so far?

5. What do you think you might do when you have graduated from --- ? How do you think studying English might help with this?

6. What do you think is the purpose (or purposes) of studying literature?

D. Information about your interests in reading, literature and culture

1. Please describe briefly your main interests in reading and how you see yourself as a reader. (You may want to mention any favourite books, authors, types of book, etc. you have, or any strong or unusual interests you have in reading. You may also want to mention any particular dislikes you have.) What books have you been reading recently for leisure rather than study? Would you say that the types of literature you have encountered in your literary study are the types of literature you might read for leisure purposes?

2. Do you have any literary or artistic interests or skills other than reading? (For instance, do you play music or create art, act or sing, write stories or poems, etc? Do you go to art galleries or exhibitions? Are you an avid cinemagoer or theatregoer? What kind of music do you like and do you ever go to concerts? Do you have any unusual tastes or interests in art or culture?)

English Studies Questionnaire: Part Three

Name _____

Please write briefly about how you feel about the work you have done so far in the first module under the following headings:

Course content
Is the English course so far what you expected it to be? How do you feel about the content so far? What are your expectations for the rest of the year?

Comparison with A Level
Do you think A Level Literature or Language was a good preparation for the English course? Do you think the A Level course should change in the light of your experiences here?

Progress
How do you feel about your progress and learning this term? What has helped you to learn and what has made it difficult?

Lectures, seminars and assessments
How useful / enjoyable have you found the lectures, seminars and assessments? Which bits did you find least or most useful?

Learning
Can you sum up briefly the main things you've learnt so far?

iv) Questionnaire, Term Three

English Studies Questionnaire: End of Year

Name _____

1. This module

Please write briefly about how you feel about the second module (Texts, Problems and Approaches).

How have you felt about the content of the module and the way it has been taught through the seminars, the lectures, the readings and the assessments? To what extent do you feel you have been able to work effectively towards a full understanding of the subject as presented in the course handbook? What have you found positive/useful/helpful and what have you found frustrating/difficult/unhelpful?

2. Comparison with A Level

Do you think A Level Literature or Language was a good preparation for the English course? Do you think the A Level course should change in the light of your experiences here?

4. Information Sheet, Consent Form and Data related to Selection of Focus Group

---

i) Information Sheet and Consent Form

PhD Research on English A Level and English Studies at University

As you know, I am in your class because I am doing some research into the experience of students and teachers on first year English courses at university. Part of my research involves observing what is happening in classes – what you are learning and how you are learning it. Another part involves interviewing both students and teachers about what they are doing.

I am very much hoping that some of you in this class will be prepared to help me in this project. I would like to put together a group of about eight students who would be prepared to meet briefly (for no more than an hour) two or three times during this term to discuss the course and some of the work you have been doing, and in particular the move from A Level to university. I hope that these discussions will not only be useful for my research but also for you, in helping you to think about what you are learning. I hope they will also be an enjoyable experience!

For the discussion group, I will need students aged 18-20 who have left school in the last year or two, rather than those who have had a considerable gap between leaving school and starting university. You will also need to have done at least one English A Level subject. From the results of the questionnaire you did for me, I can see that this means that, of the 23 students in the group, 16 might be able to help me.

I would be very grateful if those of you who fulfil the criteria would sign the slip below and return it to me, saying that you are happy to help me. I will then approach individuals to arrange a time to meet. I will only need eight people so you may not be asked to participate, even if you have said you are prepared to. Please don't be offended if I don't ask you! For my research, it will be helpful if the group is made up of students, both male and female, from a variety of different educational or social backgrounds, so If I don't ask you it is because I have tried to create a balanced group based on the questionnaire data you have given me.

If I do ask you to participate, I can assure you that anything you say during the interviews will remain completely confidential, and that you are entitled to leave the project at any time if you don't wish to continue. Next term, I may approach some members of the group to ask if I can interview you individually and in more depth, and possibly talk to your A level English teachers about how they prepared you for your university studies. Again, you do not have to do this if you don't wish to.

It would be most helpful if you could sign the slip and return it to me immediately, but you can give it to me next week if you would like more time to think, or you can email me at gabrielsnapper@ntlworld.com.

Many thanks.
Gary Snapper 10/10/03

I am happy to help with your research by taking part in two or three group interviews between now and the end of term.

Name ……

ii) Data from Part One of the questionnaire, designed to establish balanced focus group and give basic data about students in the class.

Only the sixteen students who have recently studied A Level English are shown.

a) Summary

Sex: Male x 6 Female x 10
Age: 18 x 7 19 x 8 20 x 1
Ethnic Origin: White x 15 Asian x 1
Nationality: British x 16

Home before university:
Oxfordshire x 1 West Midlands x 3 Home Counties x 5
London x3 South x 2 South-East x 2

Types of school:
Comprehensive x 7 Sixth Form College x 4
State grammar x 1 Independent x 4

English A Levels:
Eng Lit but not Lang 13
Eng Lang but not Lit 2
Eng Lang and Eng Lit 1
Eng Lang and Lit combined 0
Media as well as Eng 3 (+1 AS)
Grades on Eng A Level: A x 2 B x 8 C x 4 D x 2 (1 Lang, 1 Lit)

Parents at university
One x 4 Both x 2
Parents' Occupations: Teacher x 4, Doctor x 1, Accountant x 1

Neither x 10
Parents' Occupations: Business / Clerical / Manual x 10

b) Individual data

The named students are the eight students who volunteered for the focus group

Male x 6

	Ethnic	*Parents*	*School*	*A Levels*
Matt	W	One	Comp/VI, Didcot	Lit B, Bio C, Soc B, Gen B
	A	One@	VI, Kingston, Surrey	Lit B, (Mus D, Hist B, Phil C, Bus D)
	W	Both***	VI, Godalming	Lang B, Med B, Music tech B
	W	No	Comp, Dartford	Lit C, Bus D, Law C, Gen C
	W	No	Ind, Dulwich	Lit C, Hist C, Bus C
Billy	W	No	StateGram, HighWyc	Lit B, Soc B, Hist C

Female x 10

	Ethnic	*Parents*	*School*	*A Levels*
	W	One£	Comp, London	Lit B, Mus C, Hist of Art C
Debbie	W	One$	Ind, Malvern Coll	Lit A, Hist C, Bio A
Helen	W	No	Comp, St Albans	Lit C, Med C, Ger D
Emily	W	No	Comp, Herts	Lit D, Bus C, French C, Gen C
	W	One**	Ind, Middlesex	Lit B, Hist C, Classics C
Lizzie	W	No*	Ind, Sherborne	Lit C, Theatre C, D&T C
	W	No	Comp, Warks	Lang B, Lit B, Hist B
	W	No	VI, London	Lit B, MedSt B, Hist C
Alison	W	No	VI, Basingstoke	Lit A, French A, PArts B
Sarah	W	No	Comp, Salop	Lang D, Maths E, Env Sc. E

Ethnic = Ethnic origin (W = White, A = Asian)
Parents = Did parents go to university?
School = What kind of school, and where?
A Levels = A Level grades and subjects

*Father – Royal Navy retired, mother housewife
** Mother – Teacher Training, primary Special Needs, father in business
*** (one or both) studied History at university, is a university lecturer
@ Father – Doctor, retired, (mother works)
$ Father – Cambridge, accountant (mother housewife?)
£ Mother - Kings London, History, teacher (father business)
^ Mother – primary teacher, trained mature (English + PGCE)

5 Interview Schedules

Interview schedule for first interview with Richard

1. What are you trying to achieve in this first year course?

What is the rationale behind the course construction?

- How is the course intended to build on what students have done at A Level?
- What is the balance between seminars, lectures and individual support meant to be?
- To what extent does the course take into account differences in teaching, learning and assessment styles as well as content?
- To what extent is meta-cognitive learning developed in the course – learning about why they are learning particular things?
- How is this particular class responding at this stage?

2. What are your views about the constitution of English at A Level?

- What impressions of English in school and sixth form do you get from the students you teach?
- What connections with the secondary system have you had through your research and employment, and what impressions of A Level English have you gained from those, as well as your own education?
- What do you perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of A Level English?
- What changes would you like to see in English at A Level, or in schools generally?

Interview schedule for second interview with Richard

1. What do you feel about this class and the way the module went?

- How does this class compare with previous classes?
- Have you been conscious of adopting particular strategies for this class or for individuals within the class?
- What have you noticed about the attitudes of students towards the course?
- Do you feel the students have been working and preparing adequately?
- What do you feel about the students' attitudes to the overall structure and approach of the course?
- How do you feel they have responded to the conditions for teaching and learning (lectures and seminars)?
- What have you noticed about the students' attitudes towards the literary texts studied?
- How explicitly do you feel the students understand what they are learning and why?

What do you feel about the progress of the class so far?

- Have you noticed concrete progress in the class's understanding?
- Do you feel you could or should have done anything differently?
- How did they do in the time test and the orals?
- What about the evaluation exercise?

How is the course evaluated?

- How effective do you think this course is?
- What departmental procedures exist for evaluating the course?
- What changes do you envisage in the course structure next year?
- To what extent is A Level taken into account in planning?

2. How does this course fit into the wider picture of schools, universities and this department?

What are your views about the constitution of English at university?

- What do you perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the subject as it currently constituted in universities generally?
- What is your view of the QAA benchmarking statement?
- Where do you see this department situated compared with other departments?
- What changes would you like to see in English Studies at university level?

What are your views about the relationship between A Level and university English?

- What problems do you think exist for (a) secondary teachers and (b) university teachers in bridging the gap between the phases?
- What changes or developments in either the secondary or the university system or curriculum might lessen these problems?
- To what extent do you see liaison between universities and schools as important

Interview schedule for first interview with Juliet

1. What do you feel about this class and the way the module is going?

- How does this class compare with previous classes?
- Have you been conscious of adopting particular strategies for this class or for individuals within the class?
- What have you noticed about the attitudes of students towards the course?
- What kind of problems do you think students might be experiencing?
- What kind of successes do you hope they might achieve?
- What kind of problems do you feel the class is presenting?
- Do you feel the students have been working and preparing adequately?
- What do you feel about the students' attitudes to the overall structure and approach of the course?
- How do you feel they have responded to the conditions for teaching and learning (lectures and seminars)?
- What have you noticed about the students' attitudes towards the literary texts studied?
- How explicitly do you feel the students understand what they are learning and why?
- Have you noticed concrete progress in the class's understanding?

2. What are you trying to achieve in this module?

What is the rationale behind the construction of the module?

- How is the course intended to build on what students have done at A Level and in the first module?
- What about the selection of texts?
- What is the balance between seminars, lectures and individual support meant to be?
- To what extent is meta-cognitive learning developed in the course – learning about why they are learning particular things?
- What is the rationale behind the assessment scheme, and why was it changed this year so that the textual intervention assignment is no longer there

3. *What are your views about the constitution of English at A Level and transition between school and university?*

- What impressions of English in school and sixth form do you get from the students you teach?
- What connections with the secondary system have you had through your research and employment, and what impressions of A Level English have you gained from those, as well as your own education?
- What do you perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of A Level English?
- What changes would you like to see in English at A Level, or in schools generally?
- What issues do you see as significant with regard to the transition between A level and university?

Interview schedule for second interview with Juliet

1. What did you learn about students of English from your experience of applications and admissions? What are your expectations of English students? What do you think motivates students to apply to read English and during their undergraduate study? Does this tally with your own expectations?

2. Do you normally attend lectures? How do you feel that affected your seminars?

3. Do you feel that the seminars have been affected by my presence?

4. What are your further thoughts about the progress of the class since our last interview? What did you learn from their essays?

Interview schedule for first interview with Harriet

1. How long have you been teaching English at university, and on this course? What were your own experiences of English as a student at school and university?

2. What do you feel about this class and the way the module is going?

- How does this class compare with previous classes?
- Have you been conscious of adopting particular strategies for this class or for individuals within the class?
- What have you noticed about the attitudes of students towards the course?
- What kind of problems do you think students might be experiencing?
- What kind of successes do you hope they might achieve?
- What kind of problems do you feel the class is presenting?
- Do you feel the students have been working and preparing adequately?

2. *What are your views about the constitution of English at A Level and transition between school and university?*

- What impressions of English in school and sixth form do you get from the students you teach?
- What connections with the secondary system have you had through your research and employment, and what impressions of A Level English have you gained from those, as well as your own education?
- What do you perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of A Level English?
- What changes would you like to see in English at A Level, or in schools generally?
- What issues do you see as significant with regard to the transition between A Level and university?
-

3. What are you trying to achieve in this module?

What are your views about the construction of the module and its place in the course?

- How is the course intended to build on what students have done at A Level and in the first module?
- What about the selection of texts?

4. Do you feel that the seminars have been affected by my presence?

Interview schedule for first group interview with students

1. *What do you feel about the content of the course so far?*

How are you coping with the course?

- Have you found it interesting?
- What have you found difficult?
- Do you find the lectures useful?
- Do you find the seminars useful?
- How do you feel about your personal tutors?
- How are you coping with the independent reading and assignments?
- Is it what you expected?
- What do you think you are learning?
- Can you see what the course is trying to achieve?

How does what you have done so far compare with what you did at A Level?

- What are the main differences?
- Have you found your A Level knowledge useful?
- Do you think A Level English was a good preparation for what you have done so far?
- Do you think the course is helping you to make connections between what you have done before and what you are doing now?
- Have your other A Levels come in useful?
- Why do you think the course is called English Studies rather than English Literature?
- Do you perceive your new teachers as different from your A level teachers, and if so how?
- How do the teaching styles and learning demands differ from A Level?

Interview schedule for second group interview with students

1. *What are your thoughts about last week's work (after the first group interview)*?

How did you cope with the time test? How well do you think you did?
What did you make of last week's seminar and class?

2. *What are your views or feelings about literature and the study of literature?*

What is the relationship between enjoying reading and studying literature?

- Why did you choose to study literature at A Level?
- Why did you choose to do English Studies at university?
- What do you expect to gain from studying literature?
- Would you describe yourself as good readers and/or keen readers?
- Do you think it is important to like reading in order to study literature?
- Is the kind of reading you do for pleasure different from the kind of reading you do for study?
- Has studying literature changed your tastes or interests in reading?
- Would you say you were lovers of literature?
- How do you think the study of literature differs from, say the study of chemistry or history?
- What other subjects is the study of literature like?

What counts as literature?

- How would you define literature?
- How do the kinds of texts you are studying fit in with this definition?
- What kinds of texts would you not expect to study on this course?
- Why do you think certain types of text are studied in this course and not others?

Interview schedule for third group interview with students

1. What have your thoughts and feelings about the course been in the last two weeks?

How are you coping with the course?

- Have your views about the course changed or developed since the first half of term?
- Have you experienced any breakthroughs or difficulties?
- What do you feel about the last two weeks' lectures and seminars and assessments?
- How are you coping with the individual written assignments?
- How much support do you feel you are getting?
- How do you feel about the progress you are making?
- Has the course been what you expected?
- Do you have any further reflections on the difference between university and A level English?

2. Discussion about extracts from the course documents

    1. Undergraduate Prospectus
    2. Student handbook
    3. Module guides
    4. Module handouts

    Questions:

- What did you think when you first encountered this text?
- Did this text describe the study of literature as you understood it?
- What differences were there between the way this text described the study of literature and the way you thought of it?
- Have you learnt more about the notion of literature described here?
- Do you agree with the notion of literature described here?
- What do you think is meant by….. (selected phrase from each text.)

Term Two: Interview schedule for first group interview with students

1. *How are you feeling about the course at the moment?*

How do you feel about the first module now it is over?

- How did you find the written work at the end of the last module?
- How did you feel about your final result and feedback?
- Did you feel that you had made significant progress or increased your understanding?

How do you feel about the second module so far?

- Have you found it interesting?
- What have you found difficult?
- Have you found the lectures useful?
- Have you found the seminars useful?
- How are you coping with the independent reading?
- Is it what you expected?
- What do you think you are learning?
- Can you see what the course is trying to achieve?
- What are your expectations for the rest of the module?
- What do you feel about the set texts for this course?
- Can you see links between the first module and the second module?

2. *What is your view of English as a university subject?* (small group brainstorm?)

- What do you think the purpose of studying English is?
- Has your view changed since you began the course?
- Do you agree with the presentation of the subject you have encountered here?
- Any further reflections on the difference between A Level and university English?

3. *The Waste Land*

- Have you read this text before?
- What are your reactions to the text? (be honest) – written exercise?
- Why do you think this text was chosen?
- Who do you think read/would read this text?
- Why do you think it is considered important to study this text?
- What do you think might happen in this week's and next week's session on this text?

Interview with Focus Group, Term Three

Now that you are approaching the end of the course, how do you feel about the course?

- What are your feelings about this module and the work you have done on it?
- Have you noticed a difference in the approach of the two teachers?
- How do you feel about the seminar sessions?
- How do you feel about the lecture sessions?
- How have you coped with the readings and assignments?
- How did you do on last term's assignment?
- How do you feel about the final assignment?

What do you feel you have learnt?

- Is there anything you feel you have not learnt which you should have done?
- What problems or successes do you feel you have encountered?
- What have you enjoyed or not enjoyed in the course?
- What have you found easy or difficult to understand?

Reflecting on the set texts you have done, which did you find most or least interesting, or useful?

Reflecting on the theories you have covered, which have you found most or least interesting or useful?

Reflecting on the lectures and seminar sessions in this module, which have you found most interesting or useful?

What kind of support have you had outside the classroom? How much independent work have you done, and what have you found useful?

Do you think the course could have been taught or organised differently?

Do you have any further reflections about A Level and how it prepared you for this course?

Do you think your feelings about the course are similar to other students?

Do you feel my presence in the seminar or your involvement in this focus group has made any difference?

Has the course changed the way you think or feel about literature?

6. Selected Interview And Seminar Transcripts including all those quoted in Chapter Three

i) Seminar: Term Two, Week Seven

(Focus group students and other known students are named and numbered. Others are numbered.)

L: First of all I'm sorry I'm late, but I just went upstairs to photocopy something for the seminar which I thought of while listening to the lecture…

(Housekeeping issues (return of essays) 0:04:20 – 0:05:40)

L What I was thinking of just now was that, when I heard Stewart talking about the play, I think very interestingly…oh, hold on to that: next week we go on to look at feminism and certain feminist theories. I'm very reluctant for you to actually think about this session as feminism, as though if you look at these two, in fact in terms of the reading you get, which are both representative of certain types of feminist criticism but also very idiosyncratic – so it's just a starting point to think about feminist approaches to literary criticism. And I'll be very interested to hear what you have to say next week in terms of relating it to the material we've looked at so far in the course. So don't just think about that material in terms of Cloud Nine and sexual politics, think about it in terms of all the texts we've looked at so far this term, and think about ways in which feminist literary criticism, or the types of feminist literary criticism you look at next week, can develop your understanding of literary texts.

Going back to where I started, I was thinking, as Stewart was talking, that Stewart quite rightly placed an emphasis on this as a dramatic text, and it is basically, to use his metaphor, a blueprint for performance, and one of the things I have to hold my hand up to and say is that I'm rubbish when it comes to teaching drama, OK! Fortunately, Stewart isn't taking a seminar group this year, so no group will be privileged, but my tendency is not to think through the text as performance, OK, and I want to be up front about that, and I imagine that most of our seminar discussion will be looking at it as – do you remember Stewart said something like it is not a literary text? – he was very firm about that, and of course Stewart teaches Drama - but it's something for you to think about because my orientation is to treat it very much as a literary text and slightly forget the performance dimension. It's something that you might want to remind me of, or think about ways in which you would - and certainly in your essays, if you decide to write about Cloud Nine, you might want to emphasise the fact that we're dealing with a whole vocabulary that's outside the printed text that you have in front of you. And especially I think wit Churchill, because so much of it is – at the workshop level that certain decisions were made, and we don't actually have that information anyway.

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 would you do with it as a critic? And in order to get you to think about that – because I think it is the most issue-based project you've looked at this year, you know you have Caryl Churchill's introduction which says it is about sexual politics – so what do you do with it 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? What was it doing to your imagination when you were reading it? They're the questions I want you to consider first of all. I've given you an extract from a French Marxist theorist called Pierre Macherey – I don't want you to read it yet. All I want you to do is answer the group of questions, so you can do that by talking in a small group initially just to sort of get some ideas going, so it really is what did it do to your imagination as you were reading it, and what do you do with it as a reader, OK as a reader and critic of the text? You know in the way we've been doing with other literary texts

– we've asked questions about form, and characters as functions, etc., and symbolism... Just a couple of minutes and then we'll feedback…

(Group discussion 0:11:00 to 0:16:45 during this L circulates round groups.)

L: OK let's stop now and get some feedback. Anyone want to volunteer, to get us going…. OK S1 (Carrie) can I pick on you two?

S1: (inaudible)... I found it quite shocking as I've not read much stuff like that before.

L: So you did find it shocking?

S1: (inaudible)… but I found that as a reader, it made me empathise more with feminism it also made me realise things about feminism that I hadn't realised before…

L: Could you elaborate – give on example?

S1: At the end in Betty's speech, which we just watched, the whole speech reflects things that every woman – not literally but like metaphorically – experiences and women in general experience, like women throughout history, like going from oppression to liberation, both sexual and intellectual, and the effects of that – the guilt that she feels, the sadness that she feels.- it was thing like that, so things that I'd already thought about but it made me look at them in a different way.

L: From that point of view, are you saying that it was a consciousness-raising play – that it raised your consciousness and alerted you to… OK… You're nodding too (S2)

S2: (inaudible)

L: Yes, I think I know the kind of ideas you're working with. S3 (Jayne), do you want to come in – I mean, did you see it as a consciousness raising play?

S3: I'm not sure it raised my consciousness, I think it portrayed it really well, very strongly, especially I think Betty at the end, I think that really made the point about how she gained her independence, sexual and… you know, by being independent and living on her own. I thought that was really strong – it put it across powerfully.

L: OK. S4 (Lucy), what about your group?

S4: Yes, we were saying that we found it shocking, but also the whole thing about the actors playing the opposite sex, you know when I was reading it, and I had to keep reminding myself of who was a man and who was a woman – but you know the whole thing about invisible and visible sexuality… (inaudible)

S5 (Alison): It also made me question sort of normality – what we tend to think of as normal in a sexual relationship was sort of rarely portrayed in the play – there were a lot of - at first it seemed quite normal, you know the marriage of Clive and Betty…. Whereas throughout the play when everything happened, like the homosexuality, it was made to seem quite normal… so it made you sort of think, well I suppose it is kind of... I suppose it made you change your idea because it seemed so normal, and made you treat it like normality…

S6 It made it seem like everyday life, that was the way things were

S7 And none of the characters really questioned it…

S6 What about Betty?

S7 Well she kind of questioned it by ignoring it…

L: Is that what you found shocking, to use your term – the way the play normalises things?

S4: Seeing that video clip was like seeing the Queen's speech gone wrong, you know the pearls and the conservative look

S6: I don't think it was shocking. When I was reading it, I was trying to imagine what it would look like in a theatre… seeing a man dressed in a pretty woman's dress … it's not shocking, but comic…

L I think that's a really good point that you make, because you could talk in the abstract about a man playing this role and a woman playing the other role, but a lot of it would depend on the presentation… what kind of image, I mean do they make him look like a drag queen, exactly what sort of costume do you give them, do you give them a pearl necklace, all that sort of thing… which we don't have available to us – I mean we can visualise our ideal production, but you're right, the elements of comedy, bathos, all those sorts of things, depend to a large extent on the way they…

S6 The issues aren't really that shocking… I mean I went to Africa last year and that was more shocking than reading about in Victorian times…

L: OK, well I suppose it's also you do get this generalised version of Europe and Africa in Act One…

S6 *(inaudible…)*… I mean if it was Victorian times and that was a homosexual couple, and yet they talk about it as though it was so normal…

L: Or at least those are our assumptions about homosexuality in Victorian times, but remember that there are quite a lot of myths about what Victorian society and conversation was, and I think that that's something that Churchill is really sort of questioning. Um, S8 (David), a little while ago you were looking slightly quizzical, I think…

S8: I dunno, I think that it's surprising that people should be shocked by it today – most people have seen and heard things like that…

L: When you say 'things like that', are you refereeing to the explicit references to sex and sexuality?

S8: Well, yes, and the issues as well…

L: So it didn't turn your head in any way or make you feel

S8: Well, I didn't see any of it as that abnormal … I mean I know that things like that happen… (inaudible)

L: What would you do with it then as a reader if you were to write an essay about this? How would you approach it? What would you do with it? Or would you ignore it?

S8: Well …. Maybe you'd look at how it was shocking at the time…

L: Ok – let's leave that on hold: that's one thing you could do with the play, but again that's more about its reception rather than your reading of it. I mean, my question is I suppose how do you develop a reading of this play, what do you do with it? Um, S9 (Lucy)…?

S9: Well I think it's quite strange that, like, all this, like, sexual freedom and stuff is quite accepted, especially by Betty, but when - is it Edward? - is playing with the doll, it's 'oh no – boys don't play with dolls' and stuff – and I don't know, that's petty – it shows how things have changed in that, is it twenty-five years?

L: Can I ask you that question, S10 – what, how did it capture your imagination? What sort of play do you see it as being? What would you do with it as a critic?

S10: When reading it, I couldn't get the whole of it – like Lindsay said about the man being played by a woman and the black man being played by a white man. I think it would be very different if you saw it on stage – I think the reasons why Caryl Churchill did that would be much more effective on stage… because looking at it on the page as Betty, you read it as a woman, but seeing a man doing it, that would constantly keep the audience aware …

L: …of that disruption. OK OK. When I was talking to Luke and Robbie and Jayne earlier, and I said well if I was to say to you 'can you do a structuralist analysis of this play, can you do a formalist analysis of it?' does it lend itself to that, do you want to do it, could you? I can see you're saying no (S6). Can I ask you why?

S6: I think it would completely ruin it.

L: I won't ask you whether you would think that about any literary text! (Laughing). Can you pinpoint why you wouldn't or couldn't?

S6: Maybe you'd look at the characters as functions, somehow… (*inaudible)*

L: OK but how would you get a handle on it? Maybe I should throw that open… or maybe I should bring in S11 (Matt), what about you? Because what he was saying was that he thought… no I'm not going to paraphrase you! Can you have a go?

S11: I can't remember…

L: You were talking about myth…

S11: Oh well – I suppose if you considered it in the terms of the actual essential ideas within it, rather than the images or writing as such, but the point of it embedded within it, and you considered that in terms of, like, myth and how there were recurring themes, so that essentially there were the same story but written differently with different characters, so considering that idea – it's this universal truths thing that's trying to be expressed through the text and you could look at the words which perhaps aren't so obvious but feed into the obvious idea of sexual politics

L: Right – yes, I think the way you described it earlier, and I think it does tie in with that, and you could look at the way it ties in with common patterns and stories, but then my question to Luke was, well, doesn't the play already disturb those things that already you know and are looking for? Am I making sense? I mean if you're looking for certain types of stories, the play already, because of its cross-dressing and cross-gender performances, doesn't really leave you much space to deconstruct it because it's already a play that is actively doing that – 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 (3 seconds).

L: (Mary) and (Matt) earlier were saying to me – just to move things on – you found it because of the sorts of novels you're reading which bring cultural difference and ethnic difference very

much into the foreground, and o a certain extent we're used to, our sensibilities have been slightly redirected onto questions of otherness, cultural, ethnic difference, etc, through post-colonialist criticism, war, the post-colonial novel, and you were saying that you found that those issues were uppermost in your mind when you were reading this.

S3: Yes…

L: Can you say some more to the group?

S3: Um – it was just occurring to me as I was reading it that it wasn't just about sexual politics – I mean it was as she wrote it – but to me it was a lot about the way Africa was treated by the colonists, and I could read that into it.

L: Do you feel then that the play doesn't say enough about that?

S11: Well that's what that critic was mentioning in the extract – that by omitting any post-colonialist views - that, yes there are women being oppressed in this household, but they're in Africa where the whole population is being oppressed by the people in this household, and the fact that it's missed out is significant if you look for the things that aren't there - and decide for what reasons they've been omitted - although they have been included but as a sub-text through the portrayal of everything else.

L: One of the things that I… let me just take the seminar somewhere.. a slightly different direction, building on the points that I think we've just arrived at. I gave you an extract from an essay by Pierre Macherey, called 'The Text Says What It Doesn't Say. It's quite a difficult text, and I've just given you only a couple of pages from it. I just want to draw your attention firstly to the second paragraph you have, which begins 'initially'. (Reads).

'Initially, we will be inclined to say that criticism, in relation to its object, is its explication. What, then, is involved in making-explicit? Explicit is to implicit as explication is to implication: these oppositions derive from the distinction between the manifest and the latent, the discovered and the concealed. That which is formally accounted for, expressed, and even concluded, is explicit: the 'explicit' at the end of a book echoes the 'incipit' – don't worry about that – *at the beginning, and indicates that 'all is (has been) said'. To explicate comes from explicare: to display and unfold.'* Um – just take you down to the next sentence: '*It might be said that the aim of criticism is to speak the truth, a truth not unrelated to the book, but not as the content of its expression. In the book, then, not everything is said, and for everything to be said we must await the critical 'explicit,' - which may actually be interminable.*' (but don't worry about that bit.)

So basically what Macherey's line here is is that he's questioning the role of the critic – what do we do – and he says – to paraphrase a bit – that the act of criticism is to make explicit things that are not explicit in the literary text. So you don't just paraphrase a book – you don't just say what it's doing – you look at what it fails to say, but that failure to say something is, according to Macherey, the idea that it cannot say everything, and one of the reasons it can't say everything is, to use a translation of what he's about, Macherey's idea is that a text can't know itself because it can't stand outside itself looking at what it can and can't say. Am I making sense?

S11: Is that why…

L: It can't be objective about itself

S11: I was going to say - is that why because the aim of the play is to look at the sexual politics, that's why we see the gender of the characters is portrayed rather than their sex? So that's why we have Betty … oh no that doesn't work with Betty, but with other characters…

L: Yeah – it doesn't relate directly to where we're going with this, but you have raised a really important issue in that Churchill is showing that gender identity is performative – it's not inherent and it's not necessarily linked to your sex, but it has that performative dimension. What I think Macherey's done – let's just look at the final paragraph:

'*Yet it remains obvious that although the work is self-sufficient it dos not contain or engender its own theory: it does not know itself*…. At the bottom I've underlined the last sentence… *Critical discourse does not attempt to complete the book, for theory begins from that incompleteness which is so radical that it cannot be located.'*

One of the things that Macherey says is that as a reader, generally you come very frequently historically after a book – you know more about its time and the sorts of ideologies of the time in which it was written than they did, that the writer cannot always be totally on top of the ideologies that the writer might be trying to critique. And what Macherey looks at is what he calls the gap in the text – what it's silent about – and to go back to what Luke and Jayne were saying, one of the things that you might say – and I think Stewart raised this as a point in the lecture – in 1979, our sensibilities were not turned so much in the direction of the oppression of African peoples - our focus was much more on sexual revolution. And it might be legitimate to follow the sort of Machereyan line – to say, well actually Churchill by not having an African on the stage at all might not have been recognising that what might have been more shocking is to have an African man on the stage and what that might have thrown up in terms of other issues like inter-racial sex. I mean – do you feel the play is actually bringing that into the foreground as an issue – the possibility of inter-racial sex? Or is it really just about homosexuality, heterosexuality and those forms of sexuality?

Are you with this discussion at the moment? I wanted to raise it with this text because if the fact that I've had essays before where – and I don't think it's a fault of the students, because I think it's what this text does – but 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, in the way that you might do with other plays, and I think that this is because Churchill does anticipate some of the things that you might bring to a text, and she's sort of already doing it. Does that mean however – I want to push you on a bit – that looking at what she does with the African characters would be our only way of opening it up as a critic and talking about its absences or its 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?

S6 (*inaudible –something about symbolism*.)

L: 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…? *(short 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. 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? S12 (Robbie) Did you say that you'd read it before?

S12: Yes, I've looked at it before, because I worked at (inaudible) for a season. I enjoyed it. I thought it was more comical than shocking… a bit like a pantomime.

L: How many others saw it as a comedy?

S4: I could see how the devices could be used in a comic way

S1: (inaudible but agreeing that it is a comedy)

L: If you do find it a funny play does that sort of undermine its ability to be conscious-raising or can you laugh and be moved or changed, whatever it is that happens, at the same time?

S11: (inaudible, but agreeing that it is possible)

L: 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 – Rob Pope 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…

ii) *Seminar: Term Two, Week Eight*

(Focus group students and other known students are named and numbered. Others are numbered.)

L: Right. I've got almost everybody's essays here, I hope. There are one, two… four unlucky people whose essays I haven't quite finished yet. But all the others I have here and I'll hand them out at the end. And what I'd recommend is that - I think I've said this before – that you do to try to see me next week about them. Is that OK? I think I've provided enough annotation on the things that you are doing well and the things you need to brush up on. A major problem overall is referencing and bibliography. Do you remember the English Studies handbook that you were given earlier on? It has our preferred system of referencing in it – and have I said to you that the Harvard system doesn't really work in English Studies? I know you use it in some other fields, but that's the one where you include the date – where you have something like Smith 1998, and don't give a page reference. Do you know that system where you have a quote then you have a bracket which just says Smith 1998 close brackets? That's the system that you really really shouldn't use at all partly because it just gets in the way of the flow of the text, but also it doesn't allow for page reference, and in literary criticism we usually use page reference instead of footnotes. But if you just, rather than me spending time in the seminar today going through it, when you do your next essay for this course, can you just make sure you check it against the English Studies handbook field guide, and use the referencing system in that way, and also follow it for the bibliography as well. Make sure certainly that by the time you go to Stage Two you've got those things right, because it's one of the things that the external examiners – I mean your individual pieces of work don't go to the external examiners this time around but certainly at Stage Two, they are fairly hot on the fact that you have to have a scholarly apparatus, it's one of the first things they look for, and frequently – well not frequently - sometimes - they pull down marks a whole band because the student hasn't got the scholarly apparatus. So just make sure that you take referencing and bibliography very very seriously. Similarly, when you quote, make sure that you provide a full reference or line references, for instance. For the extracts involved, many of you produced quotations without line references. So just make sure to get into the habit of that sort of thing. OK Is there anything else I wanted to tell you? Yes, if you want to arrange to see me in Week 9, basically what happens - I normally have my office hours on Mondays and Thursdays. As it's not a teaching day, I'm going to be around – I'll be in my office all day Monday, so if you want to email me with a time, I'll book you in, or if you just want to pop by on the off-chance that I'm free, do that. But preferably send me an email, and if you can make next Monday that would be great. Some of you presumably will be going away, are you, already? So if you want me to see you this week, just let me know when you're around, and I'll try my best to fit you in sometime this week – I'm in most days. I'll give you your essay at the end of this session, so we'll finish a bit early. Another point that I need to talk to you about is that I'm probably going to be taking over as head of department next term, and this might affect whether I have you carry on with this seminar group. I'm hoping that it won't make any changes, but there's an outside chance that it will, and if that happens I'll write to you all to let you know, and I'll make sure that there are proper transition arrangements in place, but I'm hoping that doesn't happen. Some of you, after you've read your essay, might be thinking, well I could do with another tutor, it's all her fault not mine *(laugh)* – but on the whole these essays were good, they were very good, and I was very pleased with them, and a lot of them were really very very encouraging, and many of them were a complete delight to read. I was very very pleased. That's why I'm taking so long with them – because I'm enjoying the experience!

OK – you've just had a lecture on the gender – womanism – um – feminism – one of those! – well I did get up early this morning! – is womanism feminism? No, that wasn't the question I wanted to start off with! What I thought I'd like to do is get you to consider those essays, and perhaps even go back to the Caryl Churchill play if you've brought it in with you. What I'm very interested to do – because you have the essay by Cixous – and when I was preparing them, some of the central propositions seemed to be – I didn't go to the lecture today because I was tied up elsewhere – they do seem to build on – I think – or at least we could …(?) in the

seminar – the idea of binary oppositions and the way that culture provides certain concepts that kind of construct gender. Really what I wanted to do was to ask you in your reading which of the essays you found most effective and which one you – I think we could just focus on one or two of these essays – so can I ask just for general – which essays did you find the most rewarding -or the most difficult even - to read?

Silence

L: Any volunteers?

Silence

L: OK. Start the other way round. have you all read the essays? I know you've all been working on coursework…

S1 (Lizzie) : I had a quick flick through. I had ago at the binary oppositions one.

L: OK, so you'll be looking for binary oppositions…. OK. Let's do a head count. Who's read the Fetterley essay, the one about emasculation? (Pause. One hand goes up.) Look at you lot… come on… Carrie you should be very proud!

S2 (Carrie): yes, but I read it a long time ago now.

L: OK – who has read the Fetterley? (*Three or four hands – including Matt, Mary, Carrie.)* Brilliant, OK. Mary, your essay mark goes up by 5 points! OK, the Cixous? (*Three or four hands*, *including Matt, Mary and Carrie*.) OK Lizzie's flicked it, Carrie read it a while ago… Gilbert and Gubar, the Madwoman in the Attic? (*Three or four hands including Matt, Mary, and Carrie – the only three to have read all of them*). OK What I'm going to do is ask you to look at the Cixous. This should build on work done previously. Has everyone got copies? Right, I'll just go upstairs and photocopy a few…won't be a second.

(*Two minutes general chat, as L looks for page numbers etc.)*

What actually happened in the lecture today – was she applying…

S3: Well she did this thing about binary oppositions, and whether we put them in the male category or the female

S4 (Lizzie): You know, like logic, feeling….

L: So you kind of covered that. I still think it would be useful to look at it, because she kind of extends it – I don't know whether Caroline did - into the fields of politics and the politics of representation, yeah? So, feminism in a way…the feminism that you've encountered today – well, that you would have encountered if you'd read the essays -would have been quite politicised writing, saying well look, we are feminist and it's political – it isn't just a gender-based analysis, because I think we're looking at feminism today, not just specifically a gender-based analysis which doesn't necessarily have to be motivated by a political orientation with a capital P. I'll be down in a second. So OK could you start looking at the first two pages, and then I want to go back to this kind of exercise in double book-keeping, and then maybe take it back to the Caryl Churchill. Back in just a second.

(Six minutes. L photocopies and hands out sheets)

L: Can I just start by asking you – those of you who've just got the sheets you'll just have to bear with us for the moment - how far have you got in the reading? Have you got down to the

bit about bisexuality? (*One student says yes).* Yeah, OK. I just want to start a general discussion. Do you feel – do you agree with what she's saying about symbolic systems here?

Silence.

Let's start with the middle of the first set of binary oppositions she's given us…

Silence.

Do you agree with the sorts of columns she's got? Do you agree with those distinctions?

Pause.

S5 *(quiet*): I understand them but I don't think some of them can be so clear-cut.

L: Which ones?

S5: Like, head and heart.

S4 (Lizzie): Actually father and mother can't really be…

L: Mmm…OK Do you feel that consistently down the left hand side we have terms that are masculine, or seem masculine?

Pause

S6 (Matt): Yes, I think it's kind of difficult because you might associate them with – I don't know – you might sort of say that's not right because it's associated with sex not gender, you know what I mean? Not every man might act in that way, but that might be because their gender is different… or is that…?

L: No, no, no, in way that's a good point, because later she starts talking about bisexuality's potentially to confuse that system…. Actually, let's … maybe we should do something else, which is, could you complete five more binary oppositions, that are male on the left hand side and female on the right? Either in terms of colour, animals, behavioural characteristics, um… genres, anything that comes to your head… and they can be as playful as you like as long as you feel they are seriously oppositional.

(Students work quietly for three minutes. L chats to some students.)

L: OK, Lizzie?

Student 4 (Lizzie). OK. Blue and Pink

L: Ok great. Which is which?

S4: Blue for boys, pink for girls

L: Another one?

S4: Cars and clothes.

L: Cars and clothes? OK…And again which… ?

S4: Cars for men, clothes for women,

L: OK.. Culturally though don't we refer to cars and ships as 'she'?

S4: But they call it she because they like it.

S3: Women… I call my car a 'he'.

S4: Yeah mine's a boy, actually…

(Laughter)

L: OK, OK – how do you feel about ships and cars being referred to as 'she', using the feminine or the female? Would you accept that this does happen?

S3: Men don't buy cars for practicality – they buy them for – 'oh, look at my car,' - you know, it goes fast…

L: David?

S6: (*Inaudible, something to do with calling cars she because of their beauty…)*

L: That raises another question… if something is aesthetically pleasing, do you prefer to refer to it in the feminine? *Pause.* Can we test this by asking the men here?

S7 (Matt): I'm sure women think that they are more attractive to men anyway…. (Laughter)… I mean…Oh I don't know – I'd better stop here!

L: I mean, is it about the shape of the car, the size of the car – or is it to do with the fact that it's a vessel?

S8 (Mary): If a man can be passionate about it, then…

S9: But like my car, it couldn't be a boy – it's a girl – a Nissan Micra – it just couldn't be....

Several students: What's it called?

S9 Bertha!

L: OK – let's just – I mean the interesting thing is that the original opposition you created was cars versus clothes, with the clothes as feminine. Do you get the kind of gendering here? Why clothes – I mean, like a boiler suit, an overcoat?

S3: Maybe we should have said cars and shoes?
(Inaudible chat among S2, S4 and S7 about analogies between shoes and cars… whether men prefer cars or shoes, etc.) Laughter.

L: OK I'm interested that you've used the term stereotype, because you've already said 'I'm trying not to be sexist in this' so can we just keep those two ideas in the back of our mind as well, about what we're doing there. OK I just want to leave those for the moment, because I think we're - at the moment – what Cixous has got is a list of … how would you describe them? Are they varied terms, concepts, whatever? Are they just all coming form different semantic fields?

Silence

L: Well don't worry about that too much. What I was interested in was that to a certain extent what we seemed to be talking about in the discussion was whether we have a

consensus about how we read things or think about them. (?), you said you found it difficult not to be sexist – so what did you have as your…?

S10 Strong and weak.

L: Yeah OK. And explain which is which?

S10 Well strong is male … but I think that's just thinking physically, not… (?) I mean men are bigger and louder. But then I think there are complete contradictions to that… women bodybuilders…

S11 (Billy): Shouldn't we say man and woman – isn't it masculine and feminine?… because I mean it's not whether a man should wear pink or not, it's whether it's masculine to wear pink.

L: Or in fact whether blue is actually a masculine colour – it's not necessarily about – I mean what you might find is that there are times when there's an overlap. I mean these a re things to think through. You know what we think of as masculine might affect our view of what it is to be male. Jane what did you have down?

S8 (Mary) : Well I found it difficult to find the exact words for it – but the idea that women tend to wear their hearts of their sleeves, and talk about their emotions, whereas men tend not to… but I don't know how to…

L: OK – how would you describe it? Is it about emotions or is it just about communication?

(General chat, some inaudible, amongst S4, S10, S2 about men and emotion for c. 30 secs)

L: OK – we're getting – OK let's just get a few more – OK?

S12: Fight and care – traditionally men fight and women care.

L: OK. Good. Any others?

S13: Beer and wine. (Laughter)

L: Oh really? OK – Beer versus wine. Could you, in the beer category, separate it out into masculine and feminine?

S13: Bitter and lager.

L: Would that work? Would bitter and lager work?

S14 (Male) – inaudible

L: Could you do it with wine?

S3: Red and white

L: OK. Which is which?

S3: Red's masculine and white's feminine.

(Chat for about 30 secs about different types of wine and gender associations between S10, S6, S4)

L: So it's about the construction of it rather than the inherent genderedness of it? I wonder if it also links into the opposition between dark and light? Many of you said that darkness tends to

be associated with masculinity … or at least in the Othello extract, it would become masculine because whiteness was associated with femininity. So I guess in that extract you were looking at the system within the extract. But does it map onto that? Darkness – lightness, red-white?

(Mumbles of uncertainty)

L: OK, (S14), what binaries did you come up with?

S15: Extrovert and introvert – *(some inaudible)*…because you know I think men can change the whole emotion of a room…

S3: I think women can too – *(inaudible)*

L: You were saying that extrovert and introvert were…

S15: Extrovert for a man, introvert for a woman…

L:… or masculine, feminine.

(General chat for 30 secs about examples of introvert / extrovert males / females – students S3, S7)

L: Helen – have you got one for me?

S16: Umm, sort of in films, action and horror for men and romance for women.

L: Right. Could you extend that into literary genres? I mean, it's a good opposition…

S16 Pause. Well maybe like women read poetry to let their emotions out, and men read it and… (*inaudible – another student challenges this*) – well it depends on what kind of poetry.

L: OK so it wouldn't be poetry as a genre, it would be the particular form?

S3: What about fiction and non-fiction?

L: Which one would be which?

S3: Non-fiction for men, fiction for women

L: OK. Let's just think about. It's all sounding a bit like one of those Christmas catalogues you get with last minute ideas for grandfather's presents, and you get all sorts of things…. yeah… but what do you think we're doing at the moment? I mean I said that to a certain extent I'm looking about to see if there's a consensus, I want to establish the fact that we've got agreement about this. Some of you are saying that, yes, I accept that w might all agree that somehow extrovert might be somehow a masculinised – how do you put it? – tendency or activity, but you say that you think it isn't that rigid. How about the ones tat we have in front of us in that first list? How rigid do you think those are? Would you agree that nature tends to be feminine or feminised and that culture is masculinised?

Silence

S7 (Matt) So… I dunno, it depends, because we don't really know about the experience of other cultures… it could be completely different in some other cultures …*(inaudible)*

L: That's a good point Matt, I mean it is, but I guess… that's a point that post-structuralism makes, and structuralism makes as well – that it's about knowing a particular system.

S7: I was thinking that, I've been going along to the Renaissance module, and we were looking at accounts of cannibals and just how they ate people, and their justification was why should we ban eating people? – they're no better than animals, so whether man associates himself there more with nature than culture… *(inaudible)*

L: No, no it's a good point – and I think you're arguing well that there could be cultural …(?)… that we're dealing with here. Let's go back to these… I mean do you agree with these – day, night; father, mother? I mean, many of you, in your essays were pulling out binary oppositions, and I completely agreed with them, and you hadn't been asked to see them in gender terms at all. Given what we've just been talking about, if I were to say black, white; dark, night – other ones that we've encountered over the last few weeks, hard, soft – can you see them in gender terms quite easily? Are our positions always gendered? One masculine, one feminine?

Silence

S8 (Mary): You have to take it away from people that you know - do you know what I mean? You have to remove it, like an intellectual exercise.

L: Can you explain more?

S8: Well if you said cold – warm, I would automatically say yeah…male, female, but I couldn't necessarily relate that to people I know.

L: OK – so you mean it's abstract, conceptual.

S8: Yes

L: OK … round the room. Can I just ask someone else to have a go at that question? Are our positions always gendered?

S3: I don't think that day and night are gendered at all.

S7 (Matt): I mean there are some where you can't have one without the other, so rather than being separate they're part of the whole – which is where the bisexuality idea comes in – to be able to consider things from the other point of view … *(inaudible)*

L. Yeah, yeah… absolutely, and I think that's the good theoretical point that she's making here when she's talking about the value of bisexuality. We'll need to come back to this when we're looking at some of the other texts next term. But certainly... I mean, so you don't totally agree that an opposition has a gendered coding to it? Or that you do, but again you just want to see..

S7: Yeah – because there are shared aspects. There are a lot of things that you can't clearly separate and say well that's clearly masculine and that's clearly feminine because without femininity how do you describe masculinity?

L: I'm going to need to start winding it up now, but if you accept that one of her main sort of principles was that as Matt's just said the way that we understand how language works, is that sometimes we understand a term by what it isn't by its opposite, and within a particular system that's how we learn to understand new concepts, what it is and what it isn't. And does that – the idea of what it is or what it isn't – would you want to say that they're not always gendered, because in a away Cixous argues that they are, I think.

S2 (Cordy): (*Inaudible)*

L: I want to come back to that point. David?

S6 (David) I was going to say that … kind of universal the idea of masculinity …. *(inaudible)*

L: Would you put a greater emphasis though on personal experience rather than cultural, or would you say that your personal experiences could also be affected by the cultural, is determined by culture?

S2 (*Inaudible)*

S7. Cixous says that 'if sexuality were truly liberated, would we still be able to sustain the possibility of masculinity and femininity?' - so if men were free from the pressures of society to be masculine, they would act as they like without … *(inaudible)*

L: And determined by those things. I guess the point is – if you think about what we were doing in the discussion – trying to find consensus, but we all know people or things that don't tie in with this or fall into this pattern, then that might go back to what you said (indicates student) – you said stereotype – another term came up –it wasn't necessarily to do with female sexism – in a way this kind of reading for oppositions in this way does rely on or in fact confirm stereotypes, perhaps – and perhaps that's what, in looking at oppositions in a gendered way, you can begin to unravel, and that ties in with the Fetterley idea about emasculation. You might go - I mean I hope you go back and look at these essays when you have a bit more time, because when she talks about – the context for emasculation – partly it's – part of her argument is that for women in the university system – that's her line – but basically women are often taught from a male perspective, from a masculine point of view, and that actually the masculine point of view is the dominant one.

Now what I want you to take away from this seminar is – I want you to reflect on – well many of you have talked about opposition – it's something that you've clearly built into the critical reading skills you had in place after doing Language, Literature, Discourse, and I can see in your essays that you've built onto those various techniques of literary analysis and started adding in things like structuralist and formalist approaches by looking at metaphor in ways which I think this course has developed, so to go back to the point I was going to make, what I want you to do is to think about whether oppositions etc. do have – are in a foundational sense gendered, but also the ways in which these essays – how they might develop your understanding of the terms you've been using so far. I wasn't necessarily being entirely playful when I said can you think about literary genres or forms in terms of binary opposites, or male and female. I mean for instance you're absolutely right to talk about the novel, the romance novel, which is often seen as a feminine form – men were often discouraged from writing novels because it was seen as a feminine form. There's also you know the effeminate man, the man of feeling, which you get in Romanticism, which has the paradoxical status of being a very culturally powerful figure but also potentially a very feminine one as well. So you can start thinking about all sorts of things – from form, to, sort of, colour systems in texts, and see what you feel about gender in those and what it adds to your analysis.

That's all I think we've probably got time for today. After the break, the Easter break, we come back and look at Frankenstein. Take time to read Frankenstein over the Easter break. It can be a difficult novel to read if you haven't read it, so make sure you make time – and it would be very very useful as well if you've had some time to do some reading around things like Romanticism and Gothic as well, if you've got time, to support your understanding.

OK it's going to take a bit of time to hand out the essays….

iii) First interview with Richard (lecturer), Term One

R = researcher
L = lecturer

R So yes, so the first questions are about the rationale behind the course, how it got to be the way it is, and how it takes into account the change that the students are undergoing from A Level. So I suppose the first question is in what way do you feel the course is constructed in order to build on what the students have done at A Level.

L Well this particular course has been in place more or less with this shape and emphasis for about twenty years so its relationship with A level has changed rather more as A level has changed than the course has changed. Broadly speaking twenty years ago, it was trying to get students in touch with an array of literature and not to privilege though certainly to recognise the literature category and for all of it to be in the context variously of culture or communication or discourse, and all those three terms at various times have been used over the last twenty years attached to language and literature. Relative to A Level it was a more innovative course twenty years ago …

R Sorry are we talking about the first module or the whole first year course?

L The first module, that particular one, what is now Language, Literature, Discourse I, is that right?

R Yes

L … um, and because most of our students were coming in with a Literature A Level, faute de mieux, it was an attempt to broaden out and recontextualise their notion of literature. Obviously with changes in A Level particularly over the last six, seven, eight years that language and literature dimension is addressed there but still not sufficiently, broadly, for enough students for us to be able to assume it. So the rationale of the course is much as it was though its urgency isn't as great and in many ways the course would not be necessary if, in my view, everybody doing English at A Level were obliged to have a basis in language and literature, which I think should be the case. So that's where it is – I could say more about that, not sure quite what…

R Well if I, well the question that obviously comes out of that is, since the course has remained pretty much the same over the last twenty years, what differences have you noticed in the students and what do you feel about the current congruence between the course and the students. Perhaps you could say a bit more about that given those changes?

L It's probably noticeable that some students can handle this course better – some, a few – than previously, though my perception even at A Level with the language based stuff is that there's talk about discourse and structure and language in society and culture and communication but analytically they're still often rather weak, so the nuts and bolts side of subject-verb-object-complement, noun groups, verb groups, and so on - some of it they've got hold of but actually even those who've done language haven't always got a very firm grasp. They've got a better sense of form and functions, say, or text in context – broad issues like that which are helpful – but my feeling is that they aren't noticeably stringer on the analytical side. Another dimension that changes is not so much the A Level but eth constitution of students coming through: it's part of the context that has a kind of effect. We used to have more mature students…

R Yes, I was going to say – the intake of the whole university must have changed considerably over twenty years…

L Yes, we had up to 40% of mature students some seven or eight years ago and I think we're around 10 or 12% now, and they were interesting – it doesn't directly relate to A level but its certainly the context for the course – in that, broadly speaking, older people from relatively middle class backgrounds had often got a grasp of grammar especially if they were over 40 whereas people broadly speaking not from middle class backgrounds were frightened to death of grammar, so there's a social class and age dimension. That has changed. It alters how the course is received, it obviously doesn't relate directly to A Level.

R You say there are fewer mature students, and part of the reason for that is…

L Fees

R Right – but also because there's been such an explosion of young people going to university, the university's admissions policies have changed?

L No, the admission policies haven't changed at all. I think it's more the people who want to come to university or who want to pay out that money.

R And in terms of the actual A Level students, returning to A Level students, you say that those who have done language come with a bit of abetter grasp of language, obviously, but have you noticed a change in the general sort of preparedness of A level students in that time?

L Yes, I think, they're, although it's very patchy, I think they're a bit more aware of other varieties of English. While for most people the exposure to, say, Caribbean poetry, is a revelation, initially distressing, probably finally delightful, and that's a fairly routine curve, there are numbers of students who have had some exposure, partly through media, but partly through the A Level courses: it used to be called, I don't know whether it still is, 'other varieties' with that loaded sense of being a kind of add-on – so it isn't so strange to them.

R What about the other side of the coin, though, their knowledge of more classical forms?

L It's been very shaky for a long time. I think it's been shaky all the time I've been lecturing – so that's thirty years (laughter)

R Well that's interesting of course in the context of the whole debate about falling standards…

L Exactly. I think the big change was forty years ago, looking at university, and it was prompted by the 44 Education act, that's my view, and I was one of the first - amongst the first cohorts of people - coming through without a rounded classic background, by virtue of class, reading habits and so forth, but also because of A level. I'd done my Shakespeare and my - what else had I done? – My Thomas Hardy, my war poets, my bits and pieces like that, but I hadn't read a great deal - and I went to university in the late sixties, so it had already happened by then. In that respect there's nothing new since…

R Just going back to something you said before about the Caribbean poetry – perhaps we'll have a chance to talk about this later when they've actually done some Caribbean poetry - but I wonder if you could put your finger on why students find Caribbean poetry 'distressing'?

L To begin with? To begin with, some of them find it fascinating, of course, straight away, but generally it's a positive climb – they get more in touch with it… Oh, for the reason we put it on the course! The Caribbean poetry's on the course to bring them into contact with varieties of English that are not standard and British, for the linguistic dimension, but also genres of writing which are not just studio poetry or poetry which is not read silently or in small groups but to open up rap, politically engaged poetry, song genres, chant genres, and all kinds, so there's a literary generic and linguistic variety dimension to the choice - and I'm sure it's a calculating move us having it there. That is what they find disturbing. Although they may be presented with people like Walcott, and you point out that, you know, he's a Nobel prize winner, they're still asking as the course goes on, where's the Literature?

R Right, so in some sense the inclusion of this literature challenges their literary values, their cultural values and maybe their linguistic and social values?

L Yes – and the fact that poetry is by and large the least popular of the genres – again that's another thistle we're trying to grab straight away, and saying it is interesting, it is central and we don't want you to avoid it.

R Yes – so when I heard [the head of department] speaking on the first day to the whole cohort, almost the first thing he said to them was 'I know you hate poetry' – well, he didn't put it that way, but you know, in not so many words - he almost said, 'I know you hate poetry most of you, but we're going to do a lot of it in the first term, and I'm hoping that you'll give it a chance and maybe some of you will like it", which sounds as though this is a very strong message which has come out of this for a long time. So what do you feel – I mean given that, as I'm sure you're aware, poetry is commonly taught right through form the beginning of primary school, and teachers frequently do things to try and make students like it, what do you think is the problem with poetry, and what chance of success, what kind of success, do you expect to have with students in their approach to poetry?

L I think quite often the problem with poetry is that the poetry they're presented with – especially as they move to A Level – earlier on they may have good experiences of poetry in the school system – but especially at A level they're still often being presented with classics which are in to them inaccessible or seemingly unnecessary forms – syllabic, rhymed, stanzaic and so forth – and they find that difficult, they find it difficult of comp-rehension, and quite often they're not presented with enough interesting contemporary, varied, kinds of poetry, so for them poetry actually means things like Wordsworth, - who else? –Yeats – you know, they expect poetry to be either dull or difficult or both, and by and large by dead guys, and that I think is what they understand by poetry, whereas what we want to claim is that in fact there are lots and lots of different kinds of poetry, and plenty of women writing poems now– often the most vibrant interesting stuff is coming from women – and that the forms are very various and that there are very various take son life, that it isn't an esoteric marginal activity.

R Although in some very important senses it is an esoteric marginal activity – perhaps less so than for a very long time – but nevertheless poetry – how many of these students are likely ever to actually read poetry for enjoyment?

L Actually very hard to say. By the time they get to third year, while for some it's still a hopeless case, there are more than initially that are in touch with it. I still think there are things we should and could be doing on the relation between poetry and song – on pushing the rap line, or there's a guy in music here who does pop lyrics and so forth. I think one of the, without being specious about it, one of the main ways of getting kids to engage with poetry is for them to recognise that a lot of the things they like are

poetic in some measure, the songs they sing and so forth. My eleven year old daughter was just writing out the words from the current No. 1 by the Black-eyed Beans, or whoever it is, and she and her mate were sat down writing it out because they wanted the words so they could sing it together, and that's got rhyme and parallelism, refrains and it's got kinds of imagery and it tumbles over itself – it's broadly rap – it tumbles over itself in interestingly rhythmic ways, the intonation's interesting, you know you can teach a lot through it. In fact, we have in the past had more central pop but interestingly there's been a bit more of a drive towards more conventional poetry with a large P here.

R Yes, I mean, emerging from that, and bearing in mind that there's clearly a lot of tension in the higher education system itself about this topic, particularly about the topic of pre-20th century literature, what would you actually say was the purpose of teaching about poetry and, in your words, getting them to engage with poetry?

L It's obviously handy and probably essential in a stylistics based course because poetry is most obviously language at full stretch, in all its areas, syntactic, phonological, lexical, in performance, intonationally, and so on and so forth, so it establishes some outer limits and in a way it's easier stylistically to deal with poetry than with prose, which is more diffuse, its salient features are spread around and more difficult to recognise, and when you do prose - this is the flip side of why they don't like poetry very much - they of course tend immediately to key into content and character and simple narrative features, simplified notions of points of view, and that's as far as you get, so that the switch goes: prose, the novel, is all substance and content, it's not form and certainly isn't style, apart from occasionally noticing a metaphor and the other things they associate with a kind of stylistic analysis, so… I'm not sure that answered the question…

R No, I think it does, I guess one of the things which underlies all this and which I'm particularly interested in here is the business of the nature of the engagement that students have with what they study, and how that relates to their cultural values. So you raised with me the anecdote a few weeks ago about the teacher who said, 'well, students who are doing Chemistry don't have to love their chemicals' and I guess what I'm saying is how do you perceive the difference between what you're teaching, the kind of content of this course, this kind of course, and the content of more, if you like, straightforwardly scientific courses – because clearly English teachers worry to a greater extent about students' engagement with what they're studying, at a different level.

L Yes, I think, yes, there are interesting similarities and differences there, spanning humanities and sciences at large, but even if you stay with English. I think all people who are teaching and are engaged with their subjects, good teachers, are enthusiastic about what they do, and they have a love of their subject, which is not to say that they have a love of the materials of their subject, but there is something about the intellectual frame or the quest, or the desire to know, the enquiry – which excites them, and if they haven't got that, then it's a shame and something's gone wrong, so whether you're a chemist or a quantum physicist or a doctor, whatever it is, there has to be something there that fascinates you – about the subject as a discipline, as an area of activity – and I think that's necessary in all subjects and I think that's what I would hope that virtually any lecturer could communicate to their students: that these are fascinating things and they're complex, and hey go on endlessly with sophistications that you're surprised by and son on and so forth - which is distinct from the idea of venerating the object. I think the process and the subject - in a discipline sense - should invite, invoke, provoke enthusiasm, and love is not the right word, but an enthusiasm As for the much more value laden notion of being a purveyor of desirable cultural heritage, that I haven't got much truck with. Certainly on this course and on previous

related courses, and subsequent courses, where I've taught the language of advertising, language in advertising, and news reporting, it has been not only not necessary not to love the material, but in some cases I actively disliked it and still do, but as a subject it's fascinating, proper, and - ultimately in all of this I think what one is talking about is a joy of understanding, not a joy of veneration or of prior valuation, that it is actually the opening up of processes of valuation not the importing or inveigling of certain values.

R So is the student's occasional reluctance – this has come out as a fairly strong theme already – or 'distress' about what they're studying different from the way in which students in other subjects might react to the material offered on the course, do you think?

L I think English has long been regarded and often regarded itself as a custodian of cultural values. We don't have a strong philosophical tradition in our education, before the advent of cultural studies as such the nearest you got to discussing culture in a broad sense was likely to be in English courses, so there are all sorts of complications to do with the history of the subject, its self-perception and its projection, and it has, will you or nill you, had the task very often of being a repository of cultural values – which means that students often come in with a very mixed sense of what they're doing, and part of the attraction for them – and it certainly was for me as an eighteen year old student – was that I wanted to get culture. Now I didn't recognise all the baggage that that contained. What I wanted, I now realise, was a broader more exciting view of the world, and I wanted understanding, yes I wanted enjoyment, but it took me along time to disentangle the desire for understanding from the taking on board of values which in fact were inimical to me, to my own best interests, for various class reasons or whatever, and I think that students, though they probably come form a narrower social range at this university than many, still come in with very mixed understandings about what they're doing and the desire to know and understand is often mixed up with a sense of things being pre-valued and not thoroughly examined, so yes we're dealing with a mixed bag.

R Which kind of leads into questions about the constitution of the subject in its continuum from primary school to university. I know it's a huge area, but clearly there are issues to do with the move from learning reading to literary study at university, and I wondered if you had any had any specific thoughts about that, in particular this business of where students pick up the attitudes they come with, and whether you are able to comment on if that happens at A level, or whether it is to do with a shifting of perception that happens earlier?

L Yes, obviously I don't know the system from close-up well enough to say precisely when it happens. I could offer extreme points. I think that good pre-school, and in good nurseries into primary schools, there is often an enjoyment of different types of writing, many kinds of language use, expressive descriptive, evaluative and so forth, especially if its part of a fairly holistic curriculum. All those things are good and I see lots of enjoyment in my kids – my kids are spread out over an age range form currently11 to 22, 23, so I've been exposed to that over a while - and what by and large seems to happen, although I'm not sure of the precise moments of transition or transformation, is that the whole thing becomes more driven towards literature than language use and language variety of many kinds, it tends to become of course more exam focused, more assessment based, at any rate, and tends to become more cognitive and less and less physical. I think a major difficulty is the sense that to be advanced is to be specialised, and to be specialised is to be cerebral, and to know more and more about less and less. Consequently a lot of the resources that you would want to draw on for a full enjoyment of, say, song, poetry, or any kind of language use, including conversation, they have been told not to use by the time they get to age 18. So I can make a fool of myself with say second year students going

through phonology – and the nature of fricatives and plosives, the difference between voiced and unvoiced sounds, and get them to demonstrate that, get them to hold their hands and hold their throats, press their ears and things, all these physical things which they are tremendously self-conscious about and yet they are the source and ground of much of the sheer physical enjoyment of speaking, of singing, of the aesthetic of it in the fullest sense, and they have been by and large been schooled in – but it's the culture at large – cognitive responses to things and their bodies are sporting elsewhere in their lives, in dance, sports and so on, and it is assumed in general that learning is a serious cerebral matter. And they lose the fun, the sense of body, and therefore they lose their capacity to respond to language at full stretch in all its various forms – so it's a broad answer to a broad question, but I think there is a huge shift there and the problem is that what you are addressing in language or literature class is a lot of body-less heads.

R But surely there are also questions to do with – narrower questions, more related to literature specifically – which are to do with cultural messages that they have picked up about literature in society and the definition of literature, and so on.

L Oh I think the main problem is in that respect is that Literature is what other people do, that they don't do it themselves, that there are these writers out there – so, even if they are not dead, they are other people, the are somehow using resources which are deeply uncommon, whereas I would maintain all the resources of so-called literature we use in one form or another all the time, and so in a way they've been deprived of their birthright, they've been persuaded that literature is an object of study…

R Which relates to your point about physicality and cerebrality. So, thinking slightly more reductively about whether A Level is a good preparation for what is to come, for those going to university and even perhaps for those not going to university, it sounds as though you would advocate for instance, much more creative writing.

L Well, again, there's a problem with the whole construction of creative writing as a separate activity. What we're doing now of course is creative – exchanging words and twisting things around, representing them – conversation is creative, and often more valuably and routinely creative than so-called creative writing, but there are major difficulties to do with the idea that one would just add creative writing – I'm not suggesting that you are advocating that – but what needs getting at, along with the language/literature interface is the critical/creative interface, because to posit creativity as a certain kind of faculty as it were is wrong, whereas we are always already creative – it's a matter of being aware of it and pushing it to the extreme – just as we are always already creative by virtue if being aware of things, so if one's looking for distinctions that need to be reaffirmed as connections, it's language and literature and also criticism and creativity as continua – it's not that they can't be distinguished in limit cases, but it's always a matter of more and less not either/or, and that for me is crucial, so just adding creative writing won't do it, you also have to recognise the creative aspects and the critical aspects of all kinds of writing and all kinds of reading – and that's another issue, the writing/reading thing. If writing is what other people do but you sort of read, and then your own writing is a secondary or tertiary activity, that then is a major problem – you're being disempowered in all those ways, and you can probably stack it paradigmatically, you know: you're deprived of literature, you're deprived of creativity, and you're reduced to being in the role of a reader whose writing is a mere adjunct, or parasitic on something else, and all that's wrong. Obviously lots of teachers and some examining boards to some extent try to tackle this.

R And it seems to me that what you've described is – your ideal version of English is – a much closer description of what happens until the age of 14, although increasingly there's a lot more pressure at 11-14, and below as well, to change that – but the big contrast is between what you've just described and what happens to students between 14 and 19. and especially at A Level - so that brings me back to the question of your thoughts about A Level, about A Level Literature particularly, but also about the conception of the subject at A Level.

L Obviously it varies, and has changed over the last ten years. Having as was the case a few years ago, more continuous assessment and portfolio work was desirable, so you had an array of reading and writing activities and you look at them as a whole, as a spectrum - that was desirable – the portfolio approach really - but obviously that has been heavily eroded. I do welcome the kind of transforming texts / rewriting texts aspect. I've got a particular interest in issues of rewriting, I think rewriting, transforming, critiquing in all sorts of active ways are crucial bridging areas between reading and writing as nominally separate processes, so that the response is materialised and itself becomes another text which can in turn be changed That middle ground is for me crucial, actually often more helpful than setting up a more freestanding creative writing component because it gets you engaged with texts but also engaged with your response to texts, and the ways in which you take those meanings further in your own ways. So those things are there though possibly not always taken up, those seem to be good things, and in other respects in so far as people are driven to the canon or canonical works then there are difficulties. There's absolutely nothing wrong with most of the writers who are proposed to be studied form the canon, it's a question of the context and how they're approached, and whether there are other kinds of writers there to give you a sense of other values and other traditions, so it isn't of course a matter of being pro- or anti-canonical. It's a matter of re-situating canonical writers in relation to other kinds of writing, other practices, and opening up lots of different theoretical elements and approaches. So again there's a false dichotomy in canonical / anti-canonical, which is unhelpful, and I'm not seeking an indiscriminate mush in all this: I think you need continua, you need principled but relative notions of what is going on: as with language/literature, so canonicity/non-canonicity.

R I mean many people would probably argue in higher education that there isn't enough canonicity in A Level, and that there's too much of an emphasis on the twentieth century novel, for instance, and it seems to me therefore that one of the main issue sis not necessarily canonicity but that of the context in which texts are studied, in particular perhaps the way they are studied atomistically. Is that something that…?

L Yes well I think texts only make sense intertextually really and insofar as they are studied separately you get to know one text in extreme detail. Whatever the text, it isn't all that helpful. It's all right for certain kinds of technique and certain kinds of insight but by and large what we're after isn't an understanding of specific texts but an understanding of textuality and processes of textual making and re-making, and the difficulty with knowing a text inside out, whatever it is, is that it doesn't really encourage you to develop strategies and awareness that are – I won't say transferable because I deplore the use of the term! – but at any rate transformative.

R To go back to something very specific now, how do you feel this class is responding at the moment? I know it's early days…

L Yes it is very early days – we've met three times, the first one in the very first week largely organisational and introductory. It's no different from normal really – they're feeling their way and there's lots of strange – as in their life at large in general in the first year, especially first year first term, I think whatever you did there would be

problems of newness and adjustment to work regime and when you add in the matter of encounters with, say, grammar or sound patterns, things like that which for many people are fairly intimidating, they are grasping, trying to make sense of things, and find a way through. It's not a comfortable start for them in that it doesn't give them lots of familiar things which they can just slide into the programme with as though it's seamless between where they were and where they're going, and that is quite deliberate on our part because if it was seamless it would take until the end of the first year to get them to where we wanted them.

R So there has to be an element of shock in a sense.

L There is, yes - at least a sense that there are different games in play, and that you can't simply carry on what you were doing, although what people were doing is very various, depending on which A Levels they take or what they've been taught. I mean for some people what we're doing now is second nature, but they're a very small minority. For most people it's quite a shock and a challenge, and they may be wondering if they want to keep on doing it, is this what they came to university to do? And again, to be slightly stereotypical, quite a few of them will have come to read novels, and so far they've been strenuously deprived of that, and will be until after Christmas.

R One question that keeps occurring to me about this is to what extent are the meta-cognitive aspects of that issue dealt with in the course? In other words to what extent is their understanding of why they're doing what they're doing at the moment addressed?

L I think I'd answer with my very much ad hominem response, that the text they've got, the English Studies Book, does over and over again talk about the situatedness of the subject, the constructedness of the subject, that it isn't a given, it's something in history, it has changed, and if they engage with that – if they do the work, basically - they're all right! If they do the work they can keep up with it in a technical sense and also understand what is going on. If they don't do the work, of course, they can be alienated, confused, disenchanted, all those things. By and large there are two or three mechanisms to put the screws on in the course, to make them get engaged. One, coming shortly, is the time test next week, which basically, because they've had samples of that, they know what's coming, though you do occasionally get people saying 'why wasn't the exam the same as the sample you gave me?' That puts the screws on them to get a very very basic apparatus together, grammatically, in terms of sound and so forth, and for them not just to repeat metaphor and alliteration: although they may be part of it, you can't get through the test with them alone – and so there's a screw in week 5. The week 7 encounter, which is the oral presentation, is a crucial one, because they're on the spot with their tutor and the moonlight and the text, and there's no escape, and again that's strategic on our part. If you like there's a rather hard and slightly impersonal side to the half an hour or 20 minute time test. It's not forbidding because they don't go off to a separate room, they do it in the lecture theatre, so it's not overbearing exam conditions, but it's enough to remind them, to put them on the spot. The oral presentation, they've got plenty of time to prepare for, they know what's involved, they've got a template for it, they know they've got to speak for five minutes, they engage in discussion for around five minutes and then they may get three or four minutes feedback. The format is clear, the criteria are clear, but it's obviously an anxiety-inducing process. Almost always, 99% or 19/20, students say of the oral presentation that it was really worrying and daunting but they found it very useful, and there's no doubt in my mind that it's a clinching process in a fairly depersonalised structure, in that you do get to see that student, they remember you, you remember them, it's a point of contact you've given them – you had a quality

encounter, as it were, which is hard enough to get in the first year, and so – again I can't quite remember the question..

R It was about meta-cognitive things…

L Insofar as all those things are strategies to get them engaging with their own process of learning and, put simply, met cognitive is just a matter of work practice, to get them working, those things are there to do that, and they do have space in the final extended analysis, which is the most heavily weighted elements in terms of assessment, to display comparatively a synthesis of these skills, so you know there are some shocks in there, but they are quite definitely staged and we've been running that, the oral presentations, for over ten years.

R My last question is to do with - we've talked mainly about content - but the balance between lecture, seminar and individual assessment and development and attention of various kinds. What are your experiences of the way the students deal with that and the way the course deals with that?

L Yes, well we've got nine tutors and over 200 students that we're in contact with for eight weeks, and it's the first term of the first year. There are limits to what can be done in those spaces. We are tied in by and large to long sessions of three hours. In the seminars, they have effectively 50 minutes contact, say, sometime slightly less. You can get them to work off one another and get them addressed to you as a teacher. That's about as much as you can do, I think. You're actually in contact with them for about six and a half hours over the term, and the oral presentation. Yes, they're working substantially on their own, but if – it's a matter of extremes: yes they are on the spot, one to one, that's important, they are there as individuals. If they do become aware that working with other people and mainly networking outside the group is an important part of it. Then that's good, and for the rest, yes, especially in a fairly inhospitable environment like the main hall, they have to recognise that some of the time – though it's never as bad as that after the first year – they have to recognise that they are part of a large cohort. In fact in second and third year the number is never more than 60 or 70, maybe 80. In fact, it's not that different from when I was at university. I remember as a first year going along to lectures of 2 to 300, not really knowing the tutors, and actually I think I had much less contact with my tutors than they do, maybe because there was more of a culture of deference. So, yes, we haven't got a hands-on relation to students. You just hope that over the course of the first year they'll find their own way through, though there are enough basic mechanisms to support them – there's the personal tutor system as well. But it's not desirable, and people can avoid everything if they want, and there are some problem cases.

iv) First interview with Julie (lecturer), Term Two

R Researcher
L Lecturer

R Can I start by asking you the extent of your involvement in the course – I mean, how long have you been teaching it for, have you been involved in the construction of the module?

L Yes - It's been running now – I think this is its fourth year in this version – and although we retained the same title, it's a revision of an existing course, which we thought wasn't working very well, and that students weren't handling theory well, because what we felt was that they were – we were giving them some literary texts and some theory – but the way we handled the lectures was that we used one theoretical model with one literary text, but the students just wedded those together, and thought that they couldn't use one without the other – they couldn't break that marriage apart. We also thought that there wasn't enough historical range and that the course wasn't sufficiently canonical. We decided to go back to give them more mainstream literary texts, so that they could feel more comfortable with the literary texts and therefore could handle the theory, whereas before we were giving them things like texts by African writers plus theory and that was just…

R And was that still following on from Rob's course in the first term…

L Yes

R…so they'd get their Caribbean poetry and then move on to African and theory, and they'd go through a whole year without really doing canonical…

L There were some, but they were more obscure. So you'd get something like a Tom Stoppard play, which of course I might see as mainstream, but I don't think the students did any longer, so it wasn't entirely non-canonical, but the mixture wasn't right, I think. So I got involved in the first year…. For the first two years … maybe it's five years that it's been running… anyway, I was joint module tutor, then came off it and now I'm back on it as joint module tutor, so I've been involved heavily.

R And – well there are two questions I want to ask coming from that. One is – when you said that 'we' decided to change the course because it wasn't working well, can you explain to me how the department as a whole makes decisions about what courses happen, what order they happen in, and are they involved in the decision to revise courses or is that entirely up to the course leaders?

L No we've always regarded the compulsory courses as team-taught courses and team-constructed modules, whereas for our core modules for the second and third years, we have teams – for instance, for the Renaissance core, the Renaissance team make decisions about the syllabus, but the assessment patterns for all the cores have to remain the same, so again that's a departmental thing.

R But in the first year they're whole departmental decisions are they?

L Yes – I mean I think you can opt out, but the spirit of it is that we all – our previous head of department, who died, insisted in a kind of good socialist way that we all had to be there and that we all had to express our views whereas Steven's a bit more laid back and invites us to make contributions.

R Thank you. The other question that comes from that is what are your reflections on the revised course after you made those changes?

L We tweak it every year… Well no that's not fair… I think it works a little bit better in the sense that I can see more carry over into the work the students do on the cores. We felt that, the way other course worked – the previous incarnation – that students didn't feel they'd actually got skills that they took on, they treated it very much as a course that they did, and then when they went on to the historical periodised cores, they thought it was all just about history and literature, and they left pretty much the whole of the first year behind, so that's why we wanted to give them more of a historical spread, so that we could say that this course was more of a preview of what they were going to do, and we were rather hoping that having done theory and Othello or theory and a big nineteenth-century novel that when they came on to the periodised courses, they'd be used to doing that. Only some students do it, but I think more students carry over.

R Do you mean only some students do…

L Sorry, I mean only some students make the connection with what they've done before, and feel comfortable doing it again.

R So, is that something that when they get into their second year there's a sort of department policy to try and make those links… or is it really up to the students?

L At all of our exam boards after the cores, when we have disappointing exam results, or if we do, we always say why don't our students carry over there, and I actually think we're not good enough at that. I actually think that as a team we tend to teach the cores in a different way, and we tend not to say 'do you remember when we did this…?'. I think we forget to make the connections and that if we reminded students more…

R… which does link with another question that I wanted to ask later, about explicit learning and meta-cognitive skills… but just going back, you said that when you changed the course it was a theory then a text… can you explain to me how you perceive the difference in the way that it is now from what it was before?

L What should happen is that.. I think in the revised lecture programme that we wanted to have a week where they just did the theory and that depending on who gave the lecture they may or may not touch on a literary text, so for instance Alex's was a good model last week – although she headed it 'Structuralism and The Waste Land', in a way, I think, when we first rethought the course, we would just do structuralism, and then as the course progressed, well in way there was only one text she could work with – one substantial text – but the idea was that we'd do the theory independently of a particular literary text, so that we'd get them to understand the theory and read the theoretical material and then as the course progressed we could add in more and more…apply it to more and more texts, and then of course that becomes slightly difficult and unwieldy but that's the idea, and then when we actually study the literary text, we do that in a slightly – well, it depends on the lecturer – but we wanted them to think more about issues of history and context..,. and so we've got history and context on the lecture that delivers the literary texts, and then just the theory…

R And is there any connection between the text and the theory that happens each week? I mean it looks to me as though the texts might have been chosen because they kind of went well with the theory that follows it the next week – is that right?

L Yes, absolutely. I think that's why we bought The Waste Land forward, because what happened before was that we were looking at the literary texts chronologically, and I think we were also looking at the theoretical texts chronologically so that we'd do structuralism before post-structuralism and before things like new historicism, and the students were struggling with structuralism, they really were, so we re-ordered the literary texts and that's something we only did this year: I think last year The Waste Land still came later in the programme.

R OK. So if I can ask you about this particular class… and ask you to reflect on how it's doing on its own terms and in relation to other similar classes?

L The one difficulty I have answering this is that the previous two years although I've been joint module tutor I haven't had a seminar group. So I had a seminar group the first two or three years, and then I missed one – the first year I think there were teething problems with it, then the second year I felt that I was comfortable with the course, so I can compare it across…..this is the first year that we've made changes, like we've re-ordered the literary texts, and we've changed the assessments – because students went for a long time without any assessed work, and we thought that was not right, they needed formative assessment. I think that my experience with other groups is that they have not read the theory, that they've looked at Rivkin and Ryan and they've read the first couple of essays and they've lost interest. We haven't been able to carry them. We know that its' not the right anthology but because we're re-designing all the courses, we ran with it, and because the students can buy them second-hand from the year before. We don't think it's sufficiently disastrous to ditch it, but we lose them with the theory. I think with this group – and it's very early to make these generalisations – I've got them impression that they're reading the theory – I mean, they are – but I haven't quite established what level they're at with the theory, because some students are making very good connections and are understanding the work well, the theory well – so I haven't quite worked that out -and as I've said to you before informally, I haven't had that sense of resistance, that's what I've had from early on with other seminar groups and it's just chemically bad in there! Whereas I just feel that they're willing, and I'm actually enjoying teaching this group more. And OK, there are times when, like that week when I kept on trying different things to get them to open up, but I think that was the first week when I felt that what I was doing wasn't quite working, but I felt also that I didn't think I was totally losing them.

R So – obviously different groups will react differently depending on the individuals within them - but if you feel that a common experience of this course has been that students have been very resistant to theory, then what are your reflections on that? What is it that makes them resistant, in that particular way? Or what is it about the circumstances that makes them resist?

L I think that we… our rather purist approach – if you do structuralism you read Saussure – is unhelpful. When I was an undergraduate I only ever read 'critical guides to..' and I was made to feel that the kind of quasi-philosophers were people that I couldn't possibly expect to read till I did my MA, but there's got to be a way through it, and I think that what we need to do – and certainly we'll be moving towards this next year – is that we'll want you to read Saussure, but maybe the chunk from Rivkin and Ryan is not right. We can't as you know for copyright reasons put together our own work-books, and wouldn't want to do that anyway for all sorts of reasons, but I think we need structured reading, or - I don't want to spoon-feed them, but if they can get out of a theoretical text something else, then I still want to preserve that, but I think they need guides for reading – you know, please read the introduction, but what you might want to know about Saussure is that he's been influential for this reason, and these are the main ideas that might help you negotiate your pathway through this. So I think we really ought to have something like pointers.. you know without spoon-feeding them – get them still to read the actual writers but give them guides. That might be a personal view but I think that, even when I was reading the Levi-Strauss, I was thinking well I can't think myself back to what I might have done with this in my first year, and certainly I don't think I would have responded well. I think I would have felt inadequate and that's not a good thing to do.
R Right. Is that the main reason why you think students are resistant to the theory – because it's too difficult?

L Is it because it's difficult, or because we don't help them to understand that there's a way through it? Some of it is just bloody difficult, and I think with the Levi-Strauss, it just was…

R This brings me back to what I was going to mention before, which is the idea of meta-cognitive learning, and I wondered to what extent you feel that the students – not whether they understand what they're reading but whether they understand why they're reading it? What they're meant to be learning? And I wondered what you feel about that – whether you think there's a distinction between those things and how much of an issue that might be?

L I think the way the course is set up, we're implicitly rather than explicitly saying 'theory helps you to open up literary texts', but I don't think we explain that, and I think even in the introductory sessions, they're more about housekeeping issues and the course itself rather than saying 'this is why we put this course together like this', which I know – I mean I do a course on travel writing, and I know I spend a lot of time in the first lecture saying this is why I've chosen these texts, this is the theoretical approach we're going to take and why. We don't do that and I think that on reflection, we're not doing it because we know what the course is about and we've lost sight of the fact that they don't.

R Right. I was wondering what it would look like, if there was an extra sort-of bit – I mean do you have any idea what might be missing, if there is something missing? What would enable them to get more of a hold on it in the time available?

L I think we need to make them feel that it is worthwhile. That with their final essay – what I would like to happen is that they either say to themselves 'I wouldn't have read this text in this way, or I wouldn't have understood what I was doing with this text…' That's what I want them to learn: 'I didn't understand that I was a critical reader, and that critical reading was informed by things. I now recognise that. So it's a process of self-reflexive learning. But also I would want them, to find certain theories exciting, so that they think 'I would never have read this text in that way without doing that.' What I'd also like them to do, but I think this comes later, is to, say well, sometimes true knowledge is more complicated than that, and you can't just bolt on a theory, you know, but that must come much later.

R And do you feel that in your experience of teaching these kinds of courses, there's still a long way to go at this stage and by the end of the course they will have assimilated the broader picture more?

L There's a long way to go, and when I say that my seminar group are with me, I still feel that thy want to learn. I don't know at the end of it whether they will have fully understood why we want them to do these things. I think they're co-operating and they want that knowledge, but I don't think they know what it is they should gain.

R. OK. This brings me to the next tranche of questions which sort of leads on from that, which is approaching the whole question from the point of view of A Level. So tom start with the very general, what are your perceptions of the kind of experience that the students you teach are coming with from A Level, assuming that most of them will have studied English Literature and a few may have done Language or Media?

L I think it varies, and I don't want to make assumptions, partly because we have got the Access students anyway, but I think that if I have established any commonality it's largely to do with having experience of sticking with a text for a longer period and feeling that they should get to know it well, the literary text, so actually going one week then out , bang, in with another one, I think they find difficult, but I, also feel that they want more guidance and I don't think they come to us wanting to be independent thinkers. I think those students that take up what I do and run with it, think we just want them to do is personalised 'I feel this very strongly… '

R So you feel that personal response is what they feel you want…

L I think that's what they interpret independence to be, rather than informed…

R So what do you feel – you have an image of what independent thinking learning is for them at this stage – can you say more about what that might look like and how that might be achieved so that they're in a better position when they get to university – or what it is about A Level that doesn't enable them to do that?

L It could be a whole range of things, from how they're taught to – I don't know how assessment driven A Level students are because they do tend to come to us focussing a lot on outcomes like the fact that they feel they've got to know only what they need to know to pass and pass well and I find that is increasingly the case and I find it very disappointing. I've even experienced students that very quickly start not coming to seminars and not reading things because they decide very early on what they want to focus on. That's a separate thing to your question about A Level, but I don't know whether the way they're assessed now at A Level is producing different types of students- I don't know very much about that – but I feel that if students can be encouraged to again think about the fact that you can't read literature in an unmediated way, that they've got to focus on what it is that they bring to a text and how they read it, and the fact that, without misreading things, there are – I wouldn't like to say multiple readings – but there are possibly different interpretations. And I would have thought, actually, that if you spend a lot of time with one literary text, then you could do that, and I'm sure that some students do do that, but I think a lot of others sort of want to be told what they can and can't say. I don't know whether that's just reverential, but I think they think well this is Dickens and my tutor knows more about Dickens than I'll ever know, and if she tells me that this is what, then I'm happy to – and I think they treat it rather empirically, and they do that with the lectures too - 'well he said in the lecture this, and this is what I want to reproduce in the exam.'

R And does that relate to what you were saying about their natural –apparently natural – desire to respond personally; I mean is it not just that they think you know better, but also that they've picked up that that's not the way to respond?

L Possibly. I'm just trying to think of students that do this. There's no-one on the seminar group that we're working with, really, that's done this kind of personalised…

R There was a bit last week when they desperately wanted to talk about Desdemona and Othello and jealousy... and I've seen a video of another seminar at a different university where the students simply wouldn't budge from talking about the relationship between Kathy and Earnshaw in Wuthering Heights despite the tutor constantly guiding them towards different ways of discussing the novel other than through character and so on…

L Well that hits on something that I haven't said yet, which goes back to why we devise the course like this, which is that we found that – and I think again this is my experience of how students read the novel at A Level – they come in thinking of general themes but they want to focus on character, and one of the reasons why we did formalism and structuralism, characters are functions, was to try to get them to… so from that point of view, you're right, that they actually didn't really want to talk about that. They want to read content. Some of them come through with issues now – they just want to raid literary texts for their issue-based content rather than characters, and it's actually emphasising the fact that they don't know what to do with literary language – that's what they don't come in with, and I don't know why, and that's of course why we give them the grammar and stylistics course, which they don't like very much for the same reason.

R So going back to the A level question, you've identified that there's an emphasis on theme and character in the novel and a strong assessment-driven element which can be counter-productive. Can you identify anything else that A Level might be doing that isn't helpful or anything that A Level could do which would be helpful?

L Interesting. (pause) I'm just thinking about what we want to produce at the end of the three years, and how A Level could help to get us closer to that. I think one of the questions I raise last week – you know – why do you read literature, what do you think it is, and how does it function within the cultural sphere – what actually is it? - I don't think students come with that, and as I think I've said to you before, when I read UCAS forms, when they're writing about why they want to do Publishing or whatever, they think about it as a subject area with things they need to know, whereas with English it's 'I've always enjoyed reading books' – and I'll never want to take that pleasure from them, and I think I'm lucky to teach such a pleasurable subject – it's an important element – but, one, they don't theorise pleasure, and, two, they don't really come equipped with this thing about whether literature is a mode of knowledge and how does that way of thinking function and how historically has it functioned?

R So what do you think A Level might be able to do to equip them for that?

L I'd like students to step outside and almost – in an appropriate way – theorise the subject – ask what is thing called? I'm very conscious of the fact that at A Level they are thinking about what is English Studies, what is literature? – certainly some of them have been through those debates. That's very important, but I think it really is what kind of knowledge do you get?

R You talked about pleasure and the whole thing about loving literature and loving reading – can you say a bit more about how you see the difference between loving literature, books, reading on the one hand, and loving the study of literature on the other? Can you reflect more on the difference and how students might see it?

L I think there are two things – I guess I'd probably want to think that once they can understand the things you can do with a literary text, they might approach things they just have never enjoyed in a raw sense, and think 'well actually there's quite a lot I can get out of that that's rich, and I've got a different pleasure zone' – a more analytic one, but it's still there. I've sat in seminars where students have just said 'you've just destroyed this for me' and that I think is productive in a way, to get them to think about what it was they were holding on to that somehow they've now lost. I think I probably want to see them enjoy the analytical process because I do think it's intensely creative. It's not an empirical subject, and it's even not like history – though I know lots of very creative historians – cultural history can be very exciting.

R Do you think they understand why it might be necessary to do anything to literature other than enjoy it? Is part of the problem the fact that they haven't understood that at a certain point the study of literature is not to do with the personal response you mentioned earlier?

L Yes, absolutely – because when a student doesn't know what to do, and you say to them 'well did you enjoy it?' they'll say something like they couldn't identify with it, so that sort of humanist liberal thing still seems to be very ideologically built-in, or it's been supported and not dismantled at A Level, but they can't really even see where that comes from.

R This kind of goes back to – can I ask you where you read English?

L At Sheffield Poly – and I'm delighted I had that Polytechnic experience, as I think my way of learning is very similar to how I deliver teaching here.

R Is that now Sheffield Hallam?

L Yes. I was in big seminar groups - I think I had what we have here – there is a kind of thing which is still Polytechnic English – it's going, but the new universities – I mean I think that's breaking down - but I can see many more similarities between my experience of doing English and my colleagues who've been through the Oxbridge system – similarities between the way I teach now and the way I've been taught.

R And you think that lecturers from the Oxbridge system and the Redbricks are doing things differently?

L Slightly – that's a generalisation. Sometimes, I know that the process of thinking yourself out of the fact that you can't have tutorial groups of 4 to 7 is disappointing for some of my colleagues, and that disappointment might show in the delivery of their teaching.

R What about - that's an issue to do with pedagogy – what about curriculum? Does your point about Polytechnic English extend to the curriculum too in the sense that literary theory was probably more of an issue in the polytechnics than it was in the universities

L Yes and historically that's why we have the courses here that we have, and you might know that the history of English at [name of university] was that it was incredibly innovative and very theoretically driven: perhaps you heard about our tutorless seminars that had to be abandoned because it ended in a fist-fight – which I think is probably an apocryphal story but we want to believe it was because students were so passionate about their positions, it was very much at that stage of having positions on literary texts and debating them.

R So if you compare your experience at Sheffield as a student with the kind of students you're teaching now and the kind of responses you're getting now, how doe they compare?

L That's a really interesting question (pause). I think that I had a sense that my peers had just read more, so that actually they liked literature, and what they'd done at A Level was focus on things but they had read more widely. They'd liked, say, the Brontes, so they'd reads everything by them. What I find here with students is that they, say, want to do independent study on Hardy because they liked him at A level and don't get to do any here, and I talk about a number of novels, and I realise that they actually have only read Tess because they did it at A Level. So I think their approach is slightly different…

R Can you explain that?

L I think something is happening culturally where literature is being slightly downgraded as a pleasurable cultural experience…

R And how do you feel about that?

L Part of me is disappointed because I think the way one interacts with a literary text is both important because it's private but it also feels sometimes very public, and I feel that one is less passive – all those kinds of things that I couldn't quite prove. I just don't know whether there's more competition now for kids' – young people's – time. You know, because I didn't have a phone that I could text message my friends on – and I wasn't allowed to use the phone at home because it was too expensive - you know maybe that means that there was half an hour a day where I would read before I went to bed, but they text message their friends…

R Can I ask as well about the difference in intake between old universities and new universities, and if you feel that's changed between then and now?

L I think there were more mature students but they were mostly women then…

R When was that, by the way?

L Undergraduate from 85-88, and I think it was a mid-80s shake-up. I just feel that the students I mixed with – though there were plenty of nervous, slightly passive, usually young women who did literature because they thought it was easy and nice and wanted to do a degree and I think they thought it was an easy option or didn't expect to be challenged – there were still those –

but actually I felt that the younger students were a bit more political and a bit more street-savvy than I feel that ours are – wanted to take risks a bit, quite enjoyed masquerade in seminars, and I don't feel that people try on personalities here. I think there's a general lack of political sophistication in the students, generally, regardless of economic background.

R Do you feel that the politics of literature should therefore be foregrounded in our teaching?

L I actually think that if we can get students to think about theory and think about critical practice it will become a political, with a lower case p, experience. I feel that if we try to give them politicised readings, we turn then off – they're not ready for that – I don't think they want literature to become that.

R Another question is to do with gender – you mentioned that at Sheffield there were a lot of women and certainly here it's at least 75% women. Is that an issue?

L Yes, I think it produces two types of male student – those who don't attend and don't do so well, perhaps partly because of the make-up of the groups - and then there are those who attend and actually quite enjoy the more scientific stuff, and I don't know whether it's just that we produce that because there are all kinds of gender – you know, it's their way of making it their own, and do very well, they really excel on the theoretical side …

R Is that a general pattern?

L Yes, I think the male students that engage with theory and aren't frightened by it do very well indeed– or they really get off on history and do these wonderful essays that show their learning: but we lose so many of them.

R And what about the women – if the men are attracted to the scientific and historical and that advantages them, what's happening to the women?

L These are broad generalisations, of course, but one of the things that worries me is that there are [very vocal?] women who want to talk about their own experiences and bring their life experiences to literary texts, and there are certain times when that's appropriate – I think that takes me back to the personalising of literature question that we've talked about – but sometimes I worry that when we have an all-female group together talking about these experiences it's sometimes very difficult to break it down, and it sometimes worries me that a certain consensus of how we read and what we can say in seminars builds up, and women are much more keen to bring their personal histories into the seminar. Men will do it in their written work sometimes, but not in seminars so much.

R What is your feeling about why it is that there are 75% women and 25% men? Why the big gap? Is it related to what happens at school?

L Perhaps parental pressure is a factor, and I think that maybe if at A Level you were conscious of the fact that English is a discipline, that when you studied it you studied it for these reasons, then men students could stand up to their parents more, and what worries me is that now more parents have to pay, they might be less inclined for them to study this – so I think that sometimes male students think there's no value, and I think that men are a bit more target and value driven than young women are, again a generalisation.

R Can I ask about the assessment in the module? I noticed that you got rid of the transforming texts option this year. Why was that?

L We wanted to give them formative assessment and we wanted a close reading exercise as a way of bridging what they did last term with the new kind of readings they've been doing, and transforming texts was a way of doing this, and then we felt that they needed practice in

writing critical essays, and if we offered them the transforming texts option they wouldn't do the critical essay, so we decided to get rid of it. I didn't agree with that, but they wanted them to answer a question and it was to do with analytical skills.

R What did you feel was good about the transforming texts exercise?

L They can be a disaster – but I actually think the combination of getting your head round a literary text by actually getting inside it, and then trying to say why you did what you did, I just think that really – I can give them feedback on that and say 'look what you've done here' and to me it helps me identify their skills in ways that sometimes an essay, that might focus on character again, doesn't. I also feel that, even when giving them a 2:2 mark, I can talk positively about what they've done really well, whereas sometimes when I give assessed work back and it's a more straightforward type of question, and it gets a 2:2 mark, I think I tend to be more critical about what they're not doing right, because there's very little I can pick out that I'm happy with.

R Can you tell me something about your experience – or the department's – of the kind of assignments you get in from this module, and what you learn from those about your experience?

L I think that on the whole we've been more dissatisfied than happy with what we get in the end. Again that might be because they've not had the opportunity for formative assessment before, and I'm hoping that might help. I feel that we as a group we're not really telling students why we want them to do these exercises, that we get essays where students are struggling to apply the theory, and we criticise them, rather than actually reflecting on – well that's not fair, we do tweak things every year, saying how do we make things better, but I actually feel that the application of literary theory to a literary text can be a bit boring, and I think they find it either a bit dull, or too much, because what we tend to get arte slightly wishy-washy essays about feminism, without actually saying 'I'm going to look at this one particular thinker', the way they might with Saussure, Levi-Strauss and structuralism. We just get lots of essays on gender that just go back to slightly uninformed approaches to literary texts.

R Are you saying then that if literary theory can be boring…

L It can be really exciting too… (laughter)

R What are the implications of that for what the students should be doing? I mean should you be teaching them literary theory without literary texts but in a way that gives them a handle on those theories? Or would it be better to teach them literary texts without literary theories and let the theories emerge… ?

L The way we're going next year is going to genre-based courses – reading poetry, reading narrative, reading criticism – so they will be looking at theory as theory, but also I wanted them to read what Virginia Woolf said about the novel, so that they don't feel that theory is just continental philosophy and it's hard and full of very difficult words like ontology (laughter). But also the reading narrative and reading poetry courses will have their own theory built in, so they will study narratology as well as narrative form.

R OK so will they do that in a particular order?

L Poetry first, then narrative, then theory…

R OK Do you feel that will be a better way of doing things, and if so why?

L I don't want you to get the impression that I'm entirely critical of this course, because I think that when it produces very good work, it produces very good work, and only 5% of students are going to be producing blindingly good work, you know. I don't think we get the balance right and I think this course asks too much of them in some ways, and doesn't ask enough of them in other ways. I'm hoping that the experience of studying a genre, which is what I did in my first year, fine-tunes their awareness of literary form, so that they can actually see that within poetry they've got the epic, they've got dramatic monologue, and so on, and then I can think you can start adding theory. I think that's better, because I think you're helping to build their confidence around form. And I think that's better, as I don't think this course build their confidence. I don't want them to say 'I can do a great structuralist reading of this poem' when they don't even know it's a dramatic monologue.

v) Second interview with Julie (lecturer), Term Two

R Right - before we talk about the class generally, I was interested in what you said…

(phone rings – interruption)

R Right I wanted to talk to you about the experience you mentioned of applications and admissions. You talked about your feelings about the kinds of things students said about wanting to study English… (*Nods and agreement noises from Lynnette*) Could you tell me a bit more about that and what you learnt form that?

L. Yeah – I mean do you - I guess also though that this would be going back a couple of years and rather than – I don't know whether students would have changed the way they present themselves on today's UCAS forms – but one of the things that struck me, particularly where students were going for joint honours – (R: Right) - was that when they talked about – and most of our joint honours students are publishing and English – and I think Lucy is doing both isn't she? – she has that combination – um – they - I felt that they tended to say why publishing would be of value to them in the future – (R: Right) and they thought about it very much as a vocational degree and they would gain skills – and I felt that particularly when they were applying for joint honours what their applications showed up was the fact that they enjoyed reading books. Once students talk about the value of an English degree for their future, it's only because they want to be a teacher.

R; Right. OK

L. That's what I felt was the general … it's - I love the subject. I've always liked whatever, and I want to be a teacher.

R. Right

L. And it's not therefore - I don't think that they think about English Literature as offering skills… or that they want to (??…) skills if they want to get more in-depth knowledge…which I know is partly… um

R. Sure, yes, yes – um… And do you think that's substantially different from other subject areas?

(4 secs silence)

L. Well interestingly enough, actually, I did see some history – I was thinking about humanities – I think with history of art they get a similar thing: I like looking at pictures and … (R: agreement noises)… but that's only when it's in the combination of English with history of art – when students have actually been very specific and they go in for particular combinations, and you know what those forms are like - they can't give too much away – but I did see some of the history ones, and I felt that students there were thinking about history as doing something which was more skills-based (R; OK)– and also that it was a more difficult subject. (R: Right). I can't put my finger on how they suggest that English is easy, but that does come across.

R: But you were suggesting, I think, before, that something about the idea of reading – of enjoying reading (L: Right, yeah) – is - is this what you were saying? – that, you know, there's a sense that it's not a critical activity?

L: Yeah, yeah, absolutely, yeah – but, well… (R; laughs) - I think that's probably more prominent on their form than they recognise it is. And I think they want to prove to us that they're interested in books.

R: So does that suggest a certain sort of attitude to literature – I mean is it a sort of cultural heritage attitude, or… (L: mmm, yeah, mmm…)… what do you think?

L: I think that the way students present themselves is because of the cultural heritage. I've never had, even though I feel I've got some sense of what the students' syllabus might look like at A Level, I feel that they tend not to talk about more contemporary stuff that they've read – unless they already feel it's been canonised like Margaret Atwood.

R: Do you think – I mean this very much interests me – do you think that's because they have a genuine respect for cultural heritage – and a genuine liking for it – or is it something slightly more conventional or – do you see what I mean – more institutional than that? It's difficult to make generalisations on this I know… but I'm just, you know, thinking of my sort of conception of them as being very, you know, obedient to notions of cultural heritage, but not necessarily actually really engaging with the texts in certain more critical ways…

L: Wouldn't it be wonderful though that, if they knew that's what they were doing, they could come in and take everything that we say about the canon, and that the canon has up till very recently supported certain ideas about national identity… not that they would really conceptualise it that way, but if they had some sense of what it was that – *why* they thought Shakespeare was important (R: Yes) – that would be fantastic wouldn't it? (R: Yes). I think they feel – it's interesting that you use the term obedient – I think they also want us to feel they like the right things, and clearly I think the right things are the canonical things…

R: Even though they – I mean that's at the applications and admissions stage – do you think that sort of changes once they get here? And what sort of change?

L: I think that they're disappointed that they aren't getting Shakespeare or whatever quite early on. And that continues through to even, say… with my Romantics core, or our Romantics core – in Stage 2 – most students take it in their second year at that stage where they haven't fully developed their own ideas – and they're disappointed that they don't do Keats and Shelley and Byron, and they – and I know that in the exam, they tend not to write so much on women's poetry – that's still – that - there's not enough scholarship out there to support their reading of it. I don't know if that really answers your question?

R: Yes - well it does, to a certain extent, yes. Um…(3 secs) I… (3 secs) Yeah yeah, let's…perhaps come back to that.

L: OK, yeah.

R: Um… (4 secs). I've sort of lost my thread in that whole …

L: Can I just add something, actually, though…

R. Yes, yes.

L: … that I did a visit day the other day, and also I was helping out [head of department] interviewing – actually I'd forgotten about this – just a couple of weeks ago – we interviewed some students that we thought that we wanted to target – and we wanted to interview them because we wanted them to think that they were getting special treatment, in a way, because so few students have interviews now when they come to universities like ours, and we thought they had promising A Level grades, but actually because their UCAS forms were quite interesting and we thought these were candidates we would like to have, so we interviewed them for that reason, not that it was 'cos they were from the right postcode areas for widening participation or anything, and they actually had a good understanding of what the difference was between English Studies and English Literature, I thought, and they wanted to

do an English Studies programme. Now they hadn't thought specifically about authors, but I did feel that even in making a distinction between Studies and Literature, they were showing or indicating that they wanted variety and they thought there would be a skills component, because there had to be some – a way in which you would approach studies… (???)

R: Yes, and where do you think they kind of got that way of looking at it from?

L: I wish I'd asked that! And I didn't, I didn't actually… and I don't know whether it's just having an inspirational teacher… and again, I don't feel that it's them and their research…

R: No, you may be right… um, that raises an issue about the difference between English Studies and English Literature. I mean, it occurred to me that the course is on the whole, the three years of the course, is actually quite English Literature, even though it's called English Studies, and I don't know what you – what's the background to that, or what you feel about it…

L: I can – well, I can tell you that when, you know, English [at this university] used to have a national reputation for being diverse, and I think that many years ago – you know, there was all Rob's kind of stuff that he does, but we very much covered, or wanted to emphasise that they we had – that they were reading texts – and that texts were – so there was more film study, not actually film studies modules, but we covered film on the major courses, and various texts and extracts. Then – benchmarking and research assessment exercises come in – almost directly to do with those two things, we kind of, we changed tack – and because benchmarking wants students to have historically - a wide historical coverage, we placed more emphasise on the fact that our historical cores should be literary-focused.

R: OK. Although doesn't the benchmarking statement… isn't it meant to cover all sorts of possibilities including language possibilities…?

L: Mm, yeah, but it's the way it's been interpreted, I think… yeah, and I think also that benchmarking has changed.. I mean, I think the way that the English Subject Centre has been in dialogue with the benchmarking, how the benchmarking criteria has panned out, has changed a lot.

R. OK – I just thought of what I was going to say back then about obedience and canonicity… (L; Yeah)… and I was just thinking – to what extent do you think that's all tied up with sort of the … notions of assessment and product, at the end of courses that are related to the study of texts – which are of course inbuilt into the whole system – you can't do anything about them? It strikes me as a factor – we talked before about pupils coming in very assessment-driven and outcome-driven…

L: (2 secs) Do you mean that they… Do you mean that they might feel that if they're go for a safer bet… then they're more likely to produce good work and don't take risks?

R: I'm not sure… I think what I mean is that they might see… um… texts as sort of packages that they have to understand to be assessed on… and that that might be something that they come from school with, because that's how very much A Level is packaged… (Right) and that if they're very assessment focused, as you feel they are… they might be unwilling to sort of break out of that idea of a text as simply something… something on which there's a body of information that they have to know, in order to be tested on…(laugh)

L: Yeah. yeah.

R: Do you see what I mean? (laugh)

L: Yeah. And,,, yeah, I think I talked about this the last time we spoke – that I was alarmed - again, I'm not sure if I'm taking this off in a different direction - that students - you know - that response we had to the Romantics exam paper where they said, you didn't give us a lecture on this subject therefore why is there a question on it, to me indicate that they are treating it as – they want to download, that they feel that we're not giving them ways of reading, we're giving them information that they feel is downloadable.

R: Yes, OK. I suppose what I was trying to say was that there's a sense in which that vision of a text as a bundle of stuff that they can just *use* - kind of hooks into that whole thing about obedience to cultural heritage, because that cultural heritage model is very convenient for that way of looking at literature. Anyway (laugh)… that's just me musing…

L: But it is – and I totally agree with that…

R: And they're… so what they're coming up against is a way of looking at literature that's much less convenient for them in terms of how the information they need is gathered…

(Phone rings,, tape stops and restarts a few minutes later).

R: OK – going back to the seminars. There are a couple of questions I want to ask before taking about the class generally. First of all, you've been attending lectures – you're – I think you're the only one of the seminar leaders who had been attending lectures – and I just wondered if you could say a bit about whether you normally do that, whether you – what you found when you got to it…

L: Yeah, OK, there are two reasons why I want to do it with this course – it's because I actually feel that this is the one course where it's less streamlined than I feel – I may be incorrect – that some of our other courses are. If I feel that, for instance, a colleague is doing a lecture on the masses (?) and the Gothic, I would like to attend it. If I really can't, I don't…(?). With this course, I want to know what the lecture… how the lecture is dealing with the information, what priority they're giving to what. It's helpful for me for getting my head in gear, and I feel that I can then go into the seminar with the students trying to see whether they've got the same picture of things (R: agreement noises) – and I think it's the only course I'm involved with where each year I would make sure I attend the lecture. We've got a lot of new members of staff and because that course also, we've always used it as an opportunity for first year students to see all the members of staff on the teaching team, so when we actually lose and get new members of staff I think it's important for that to happen – but it's mainly I think that things about juggling in that I want to go to the seminar feeling that I have a sense of what students will see.

R: Yes, absolutely. Thank you. The other general question about the seminar that I wanted to ask was to what extent you feel that my presence there has been any kind of factor? Has it disturbed or changed or affected what's gone on?

L: I honestly feel – I mean I genuinely feel that students forget you're there, I really do. They have certainly been more enthusiastic and more polite than any of the other first year seminar groups I've had. That might just be the dynamics of the group. We don't have as many mature students in the group and I've had groups where you can get mature students being belligerent, or if they don't like something, that then takes over the interaction of the group. I'm not just saying that mature students are bad because I've got tow very good ones, but younger students, the more traditional entrants, are less likely to say this isn't what I expected, it's not being delivered well, and I feel that – and I've said this to you before, that this bunch seem to be willing to go with it.

R: And has it made any difference to you? I mean… what kind of difference do you think it's made? (Laugh)

L: Um… it *has* made some difference. I mean I think that I…I've been much more conscious, I think, of feeling that I want students to get to a certain place, whereas I know that I have kind of strategies that I want to adopt in the seminar and I know that I want them to have – I want them to have advanced in the very short time I have with them. But I think that the way that I teach the advanced seminars is that I tend to want to be a bit more of a facilitator and that I want to encourage *them* to… but I don't do that so much with first years – but I think that rather than actually saying these are the points I think we should cover but it doesn't matter if we don't get here by the end of it -I've done that more in terms of each seminar. What having *you* there has made me think about more is how do these seminars build together and what threads am I following through? And I actually feel it's been very valuable for me to think in those terms… whereas I think I've done building blocks when at the end of the course I've thought, where have we got to then?

R: And you don't feel that it's been inhibiting in the sense that you might have, I don't know, maybe gone off on avenues to see where they go in a way that you might have been inhibited to do – I don't know, that's just a suggestion.

L: I might have been. I don't think so. I certainly wouldn't be as rude with some students as I might be. I think I've been easier on… I was going to say on their lack of preparation, when they haven't prepared, but actually this group has prepared – it's only this last week, *(both laugh)* and I kind of expect that, and I didn't want to be, you know, hard on them… but I think that if I've had students who were serial non-preparers, I would probably just have sent them out and said, look don't bother to come to seminars unless… and I might have been less likely to do that with you there (R: laugh). *I've* been better behaved. (R: Laugh)

R. OK. Thank you. So now going on to the actual students in the seminars and the progress that they're making, the last time we spoke formally about this was just before Othello, I think, so they've done Othello and Cloud Nine, I think - yes Othello and Cloud Nine. How do you feel generally – of course you've got their essays to reflect on – how do you feel generally about their progress – and how have you been dealing with it?

L: (4 secs). I think that… on the whole I feel that their progress is good, actually, I didn't give any very high marks for it, if I can just talk about the essays initially – I didn't give nay high marks, I only had one fail (*knock on door … brief interruption*). But every essay – the majority of essays anyway – tried to do what I'd asked them to do. I didn't get any essays which were character analyses in Othello.

R: So they'd all engaged with the theoretical context…

L: Yes, and with some, it produced more interesting work than with others, but they really had – I mean, you know, some of them were at a low level, but they had done that – and I feel that in the seminars, I had to pull them back a few times, and they've been unconfident, which is understandable, but I am pleased about the progress that they've made, and I thought that even though we had a very general discussion about binary oppositions, I don't know, I mean I don't know whether - during that I came out of that thinking initially, well…

R: You're talking about the feminism one – the last one?

L: Yeah, the very last one – the non-text based one. I was quite pleased that – I hoped some of them were taking on board the fact that you had to have a cultural understanding of – you know they're not just created as themes – 'cos that's the other –actually what they - students sometimes were working with things like binary oppositions and actually confusing them with themes – and I hoped they grasped that, but then I thought some of the ideas were just too off-beam, and not really taking on board that idea of cultural consensus around the meaning of terms -

R: I mean I thought that whole session was very interesting.

L: Right -

R: Because it seemed to sort of –I don't know, to me it seemed to uncover a sort of layer of pre-literary knowledge that they didn't have, that you might sort of want them to have before tackling the literary (Laughs)…

L: Yes, I think you're, yes, absolutely, completely agree with you…

R: And it set me thinking about what one would have to do with students in order that they should come to university having that kind of knowledge – even though it's not the kind of knowledge that you might teach as part of a literature course – so there's a whole sort of thing about general education there, isn't there?

L: I mean it did show up for me quite clearly – you know that whole – how kind of just – the way in which they are subscribing to dominant ideologies of all sorts. Yeah, they can send it up a little bit, but I thought actually their initial reaction was to just confirm them rather than to hold them up and say look I recognise this as a major – and that was in a way worrying, but it also told me a lot about the students.

R: Absolutely, and presumably it also gives you a very clear picture of some of the problems that they might have in leaping to a literary critical level..

L: Yeah, absolutely

R: And I thought also that - what related to something that had happened in the seminar a couple of weeks ago, when you talked to them about - it was the Cloud Nine seminar – when you talked to them about how they would approach the text as a critic.

L: Yeah – it fell a bit flat, that one, didn't it?

R: How did you feel about that?

L: Well, actually I came up and talked to my colleague Simon about – because he has a seminar group - and it was one of those days when I felt exhausted and that I had let them down – because I think that I – and Simon was saying that he had just done some groundwork with them and said look - Churchill is giving us characters that are in opposition - what are they and what are their characteristics - and next week we'll go on to add an extra layer to that. And I felt that I completely just went straight for the meta-level of analysis without thinking through the fact that maybe it should be two-stage, so I felt I'd let them down a bit, but I also wanted them, I think, to - getting towards the end of the course, to start thinking about that – and I took a risk and I think it was the wrong one. I think I should have done it –in a way done something similar to Simon's exercise – these things are made very explicit by Churchill, but let's see if you can identify them anyway – because I might have found that actually they can't very easily – or that they might have been able to say well here's one sort of stereotype that she's offering us, but it's still a bit more complicated… so it went badly, but I do hold myself responsible for that – they weren't ready to go there I think.

R: I mean they were trying to deal with sort of issues to do with stereotypes (…??) in the comments that they made, but they were kind of struggling with the concept of dealing with the text as a critic. But I thought that was very interesting because I wondered whether anyone's ever explained to them what a critic is, or what being a critic has to do with studying literature.

L: Absolutely, I do not know what you mean. Yes.

R; Anyway…

L: But isn't that interesting because in a way you've got those degrees where – I'm doing medical training because I want to be a doctor. There's that sense of what are we doing to you and what kind of professional identity do you have at the end of this, and I don't think they think about our degrees giving…

R: And maybe that relates back to where we started with your point about skills (L: Yes) –because they don't really have a concept of a critic – either they don't have a concept of a critic or they don't have a concept of a critic as a socially useful occupation. Is that it?

L: I think – well – wouldn't it be interesting – that – yeah, the latter, as well as – but I also wonder they don't see themselves as critics and I think that they – and I frequently feel that there's scholarship that will confirm their thinking – and I think that's why this course presents such difficulties, because we're saying use the theory to develop your own reading – but I still feel that in a way they feel that that's kind of creative and acceptable, but perhaps not legitimate.

R: To what extent do you feel that when you were at university, you had a kind of fairly concrete vision of what it meant to be a critic?

L: I didn't have at all until my first encounter with a very ideologically-driven tutor who handed me back an essay and said – one, where's your voice, and two, something like – you know it was very idealistic – something like I want to develop your critical voice -and I remember having a tutorial and it kind of went form there – but if somebody who didn't have a kind of political agenda, such an explicit one, had said this to me, I might not have noticed it so much.

R: That's what I was going to say - is part of the reason why the concept of being a critic is difficult is perhaps that there isn't agreement on what it means? (L: Yes). It can mean very different things, and it's one of those things that is presumably less explicit in some versions than in others (L: Yes) Because that was my experience at university – was that I hadn't really got a clue all the way through what it was for – but I was engaged in the struggle to establish what it was for, all the way through, so it was constantly a process of trying to pick up what other people thought it was for…

L: I mean when I did a group with – I had a group of – what year are they in when they've already sent their UCAS forms off? – anyway I had a group of those students in – and again I might talk to you about this, but I just said, you know, what we really want you to get to at the end is that you've been studying literature but you are cultural critics and actually the analytical skills you've got for analysing culture and the role that culture plays in the wider social sphere – you know, you should be able to take that into social policy research, any form of cultural research… but I think it didn't really… you know, maybe they took it on board, I'm not sure.

R: Well. I think one of the reasons they don't take it on board really is that it's not important for passing their A Level in English whereas if you're doing Sociology, say, it's just obvious – it's obvious that that's what it's for, that that's what it's about…

L: And is it just implicit – do you not have to have a tutor that's reminding…

R: I don't think so, because – I'm not suggesting that studying literature is the same as studying sociology, but in subjects like sociology and history – you mentioned before that history was more explicit about the skills – the texts are primary in a sense but always in a sense secondary to the actual study, whereas in literature the texts have to be – well, the texts are

primary in a sense, but within that the reason for studying the texts can get lost – something like that…

L: Yes, I do know what you mean. Yes.

R: So I think that's what happens a lot at A Level – the texts become everything, and the reasons behind it get lost… um, yes.

L: Do you think – it's a very different subject and it's probably not in any way legitimate as a comparison – when students take a subject like biology, do they feel, do you think, at A Level - that it's just about receiving information and showing that you're clever because you can do biology, or something?

R: Well, I think it's interesting because Science – I mean I think there's a big difference between Sciences and Social Sciences in that respect – and I was thinking about this the very day – in fact, I jotted something down during the seminar… see if I can find it… yes, here we are: 'In Science, students don't learn about the power structures and social contexts of their study or their subject usually, perhaps because the object of their study is not cultural it's natural'. Which isn't to say that scientists shouldn't – and I know there's a lot of people saying that they should – but … the big difference is that the actual object of study in Science is not a cultural construct – well, some would say it is, but in some ways it's clearly not.

L: Yes, even at undergraduate level in a subject like that… but you're right, but you see also in relation to that question I can see how in Sociology that's very much what students are engaged with all the time, and with literary study we kind of have to get them to be receptive to that. I don't like that idea that 'you've just ruined this for me'. I don't think a student would say that about – you know they wouldn't read Freud and say 'you've just ruined this for me'

R: Yes, and so I mean one of the big problems that students have to deal with is that they have to come to terms with is the fact that different subjects are not equal, they're not parallel, they're not - the same parallel doesn't hold every subject of study, and because we bottle things into individual subjects all the time, just like in Literature at A Level we bottle things into individual texts, they don't actually have the chance to think between subjects, and think about the differences between subjects, just as at A Level, they don't have the chance to think about the differences between texts and the comparisons between texts, so again they're not equipped in that kind of meta-cognitive way. I think that's what you were suggesting…

L: Yes, absolutely.

R: OK. What else do I want to ask you about the class? Well, do you have any other observations about the way the class has dealt with anything in particular, or the differences between students in the class – or …

L: Well, there are students that I feel that have been very lively in seminars, and engaged, and there are students that – this happens frequently, as you know - that they seem to be very good, shooting from the hip, but then their written work's a bit slapdash, and either they're just not putting enough into it or actually they don't write very well. There are some students that I feel have been making good progress in terms of their seminar work, but it just hasn't been coming through in terms of their written work. But most of those students have come back to me in tutorials and said 'my teachers have always said I can't organise an argument.' In terms of actually their contributions, I know that there are students that I can pick on – Lindsay Lamb, who I think in many ways is actually an average to slightly weak student but has that – you know – kind of middle class kind of confidence and she'll also, you know, say things – you know, I think she thinks through her answers, I really do – she's a pretty average student, and I can use her comments as a good benchmark.

R: I also wonder with her whether the particular kind of public school background she comes from has had an effect – because she's clearly been trained extremely well in a certain kind of literary – thing, and so there's that element with her as well. What about students who've been very quiet? Did their written work suggest that they'd been hiding their light under a bushel?

L: There were a couple, but I think on the whole that as a group most of them have made some contribution. There were the two young men who I thought might be not quite engaged, which is Derek and Colin, proved not to be…

R: Proved not to be engaged or…?

L: Yes. I mean I think Derek just wants to do his own thing.

R: Which is which? The fair-haired tall one – that's Derek?

L: Derek, yes. Colin, I think, I suspected that he was having problems, and so he hasn't really engaged with the theory – he produced an essay that wasn't – um – I'm just thinking about some *women* who disappointed me, but again, most of the women who disappointed me, Gary, it was about writing – they tried their best, but they didn't really know how to put together an essay – whereas Derek, was just that I think, and again I might being …(?) in sexist stereotypes, but – of a young man who thought I'm just going to go my own way, because this is what I do, and you either like it or you don't, and it was – actually you could see that, without saying 'I', it was actually quite personal. I think that – so you were asking about – I've forgotten what the question was…

R: It was about differences between students… I originally asked you about quiet students who hadn't said a lot, but…

L: S*o*phia, or Soph*i*a, – I did ask her how to pronounce her name, and she said she was easy – she sits next to Billy usually, and doesn't ever say anything… whenever I look at her, she - so I actually haven't picked on her, but her work was good, it was reasonably OK. So she was a student that surprised me.

R: What about Billy?

L: Again, he was idiosyncratic. I wrote a comment on the end of his work saying something like, you're approaching this as though you're an actor and you're being too reverential - he didn't really take on board the theory, which is a bit like what happens in the seminars – he begins to say something interesting, and then it becomes a bit wayward, but I thought he was just too much like – this is Shakespeare, I can't touch it really. Matt's was just exasperating – it was short, it was flashy – it was flashy – I don't mean arrogant flashy – it had flashes of spark and it was a sparky essay, and I was enjoying it even though it wasn't always quite what was wanted, and then it sort of just ended, and he said – oh I ran out of time, so I think he's going to be an infuriating student –and might actually be one of those men that I was saying can produce good work in exams because…

R: I mean they do seem to fit into the pattern you described – some men who are quite inspirational and flashy, and some who just drop out of it altogether – like Colin and Billy…

L: I think Billy we can mould and help him along and if he's willing, he'll be OK.

R: What about the access students?

L: Well – interesting, because Fiona, who's the taller woman with the longer hair, who's been in and out in terms of seminars because she's had childcare problems – I've seen her at the

lectures, but she doesn't always come to the seminars – she produced a wonderful piece of work for me, I think it wasn't quite formalism and structuralism, but she can write very elegantly so she had all those things which made it a top B+ - and Jane did a very good piece of work as well. They both did all the things I would want them to do at this stage.

R: Can I ask you about Helen and Emily?

L: Emily – yes, I spoke to her - her - you know I kind of expected her to be a mid B – she got around 55 or 56 – and her work was – she didn't develop points, but she said that was due to a lack of confidence – she just wanted to say something but not to develop it because she thought that would be risking too much – and it was very fragmented –so I suggested she sees one of the Royal Literary Fund fellows in terms of getting another person to talk to her about how to organise her essays – but I think she's insecure.

R: And Helen…?

L: Helen … (looks for essay)… I'm trying to think… Oh yes, Helen's better – I gave her 59 because she was gesturing, making all the right gestures – but again, writing difficulty. Interestingly enough, the mature students and the male students – if I can do that terrible analysis! – could all compose sentences well and organise their thinking pretty well – and the other – I think Carrie did quite well – so there were some students that I'd already picked out in seminars as having the potential to do well, but there were a lot of writing difficulties.

R: And finally, Alison?

L: Yeah – I need to be reminded of her mark - I don't remember her essay… (looks for essay)… 60. If I look at my spread of marks, Gary, there were a good few 60s…

R: Which is a… B?

L: B+. Yes – and then there's a big drop to 50s because of the writing problems.

R: In the writing assignments on the first year generally, is that an average sort of area – B/C? I got the impression with Richard's group last term that almost – sort of about two-thirds of them got Cs.

L: Yeah. I think that we've had never had formative assessments at this stage. I know that I was encouraging and slightly generous with my marks, because obviously the first year – whether I give them 60 or – it doesn't – so I think the categories were OK, but I probably wanted to give them 59 rather than 56, or something – but I think it's a better group than I've encountered before. I didn't give any marks in the 40s because, going back to the point I made earlier, they genuinely were engaging with, or showing that –

R: Yes, yes. So do you think the last seminar was a bit sort of end of term – we've done the essays, the last thing. we can't be bothered to do the reading?

L: Yeah. Well I did expect them not to have done the reading. Well actually I thought they might have read a little bit, but they hadn't read anything – I was disappointed with that. But I do think that in terms of – it's a shame I'm not continuing with them because I got something out of that last seminar – I don't know how much they did – but certainly in terms of – mm - shaking them up a bit – I think I would start next term by shaking them up a bit more – and certainly when Harriet takes over, if she wants me to give feedback about the group – I mean I really wouldn't want to say too much about the group, but certainly one of things I would say is you do need to shake them up a bit when it comes to what it is we're doing and the sort of preconceptions that they have. (Pause) But you know there are students – the students who

(…?…) – will say to me 'I didn't study literature to learn about power relations', (R: Really). and I think that they feel that that's – some of them – not what they'd quite bargained for.

R: But that hasn't happened this time? You haven't had any students saying that this time?

L: Not within that group.

R: But it's fairly common.

L: Mm… it has been in first year groups in previous years – you know 'I didn't expect this and it's just (..?)' But then I think that marks the difference with this group. It's interesting about this group – I think that they are sometimes perhaps politically and ideologically more naïve, perhaps, as a group – but they're not resisting what they're getting. That just means that they're more compliant.

R: Do you think that their general sort of compliance might be related to, there might be a corresponding naivete, so a group that is less compliant is less naïve as well?

L: Yes, I think I possibly would want to say that.

R: That's interesting because that suggests that a group which is more politically aware will also be more resistant to a more political approach.

L: Possibly – unless you can just maybe think that they're extending their political coverage.

R: I suppose a more politically aware group might be more conscious of political ideology, or a political approach – might be more conscious of what's being done to them.

L: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I would love for them to come out of lectures saying not just that was hard or they lost me there, but to say… you know, I didn't like that approach.. or I found that approach you know difficult

R: This goes back to the question of obedience and compliance which I mentioned earlier – and I do - you know – my interviews with them – when I'm trying to probe what on the question of what they've understood and why they think they're doing things a certain way – very often when they come up against a brick wall, they just return to the idea that they're doing it because they have to pass an exam – you know that will be the ultimate end point for them when they've got as far as they can go

L: I mean what you're saying – sorry I don't mean to interrupt you - but you might see next term when they do the exam revision question – and they'll say well how many theories do I need?' and I'll say 'well how many theories do you want?' – you know, we want you to know them all… that's very much about…

R: So, finally, if you were going to be continuing with them next term, do you have any predictions for next term, based on previous experience or…? (L: God!) Are there particular kinds of developments that you might expect to be typical of next term rather than this term in the course?

L: *(2 secs)* That's a very difficult question really. The students that have done in terms of their written work well, and I've been able to say to them, you're doing very well and I'm very pleased with where you're at now, I'd like to think that that gives them confidence – and I've encouraged them all to say look take risks in seminars, don't misread things, but try out your ideas, and I'd like to think that students might go into next term having had feedback, that there's a group of students, because there is a considerable proportion of them who got good B+s, and I've said to them, this is good work, I've tried to emphasise what they're doing well.

I'm hoping that that will have a pay-off in terms of the seminar contributions. However, what they might feel is that again having another new theory that they've got to understand might just still be difficult for them, but – and I would hope that with certain students, the ones that have been quiet because they don't want to expose their frailties – might now feel that they've got something to say – and if I don't feel it's intimidating… Emily said to me – her first reaction was 'it's very intimidating' and I said 'well what do you mean by *it*?' – because clearly she can speak to me, she doesn't have any problem with me –and she said well it's just the course, so it's very – I should have asked her what she felt about the seminars, but when I have asked students they've said that they just don't want to look stupid, and I guess they feel that it's the kind of course that can expose their

R: I get the feeling that they're quite comfortable with you and with each other, (L: Good) but that they find the subject matter difficult, and that's why they won't speak.

L: If I'd just a three chapters of Rivkin and Ryan, my head would be a bit… yeah, I mean to get them to think that they can then come to a seminar and speak

R: OK. Thank you. Is there anything else you want to say about the…

L: No – well, in terms of your small group – do you feel that my observations are supported by the way they're…

R: Yes, I do. I think they are very compliant and obedient. I think they are trying to do the reading. I think they find it pretty difficult and give up some of the time, but I think they are all trying, and I think they're all eager to learn in – in certain ways – but I think they're not quite clear some of the time about what it is that they're learning, or… but they are very keen in certain ways. And I also think that they quite enjoy the seminars.

L: Well, that would be good. The other thing is attendance has been good in my group, and I've spoken to colleagues, and they have seminars with 6 or 7 students, and my numbers have never gone that low. I know that there's a core, and various people come in and out – but it's large, it's a decent size.

R: I think they enjoy them. I think on the whole it tends to vary depending on exactly what's happened in the seminar. I mean I think that they like it when they can see that they've made progress. When they can see that they've learnt something – though of course it's that things where they desperately want spoonfeeding, and they're not going to get it of course, and they know that they're not going to get it, but I think there's a certain balance where they've been fed enough so that they can begin to understand the more difficult stuff. Where they tend to feel disillusioned is where they feel they haven't been fed enough so that the rest doesn't make sense. Do you see what I mean?

L: And of course, Gary, students in the past have – I've had quite a few students who remind me that some things I'm not good enough at saying to them, 'that's a really good point, that's a valid point.' And I have tried more so with first years to say 'that is relevant,' but I haven't always achieved that, because it is a failing on my part. Sometimes with students further on in to the degree, I say to them 'look can you just hold on to that idea' and I don't comment on it, and sometimes they feel that's my role – but I have tried, because I do feel that at some level there is knowledge that they need to know, so I've tried to be a bit better at that.

R: OK. Thank you

vi) First focus group interview, Term One

A *Alison*
B *Matt*
B. C ***Lizzie***
D *Emily*
E *Helen*
F *Billy*
G *Sarah*
H *Debbie*
R *Researcher*

Initial question about how they're finding the course so far – unfortunately I missed recording the first minute or so…

B The past papers and so on … I dunno, it all just seems quite complex for twenty minutes sat in the main hall. I mean I didn't do any grammar in A Level so it's something I've had to pick up over the last couple of weeks. (general agreement)

R And would you all agree that the grammar is quite …. (general agreement)

C Like, the questions on the past papers… it's the way they word them as well (general agreement) … it seems quite complex but really it is just 'underline the verb'… but the basic stuff, I dunno, like stuff that's in A Level, you know like alliteration, that's all quite OK…

B Some of it's because it's stuff that we've been taught before but the names that are attached to it we don't recognise. (general agreement)

R OK. Can I just ask whether you (Student G) feel any differently about the grammar because you did English Language?

G Yes, I've done it all before – I'm lucky. (general laughter)

R So you're at quite an advantage! How do you (others) feel about that?

A Well we might have an advantage later on because we've done the literature side, so we'll find it easier later, so I suppose it's swings and roundabouts…

R OK, but you're having to bide your time… before you get your moment!

A Yeah (laughter)

B I think a lot of people that have done grammar are finding this first bit of the module especially quite dull and repetitive…

R Right

B …and I was talking to one girl and she didn't seem to…. She thought it was so simple that everyone else must be quite stupid (laughter) and it was … I think because it's the kind of module that's trying to bring everyone up to the same level, I think, if you see what I mean, it might have been better if that had been done before…

R You mean at A Level?

B Yeah, I think so.

R Does anyone else feel that, reflecting back on what you did at A Level, it might have been better if you'd done some of this then?

H I don't think I would have done English if that's what it was going to be. (general agreement)

A I think it might have been good if some of it had been introduced sort of subtly throughout the course…

C Yes, not like a specific exam or anything…

A … because it is all quite new at the moment, to me, generally.

R So you mean gradually introduced during which course? The A Level course?

A Yes, A Level, just a bit more on the English side of it

C Or maybe like with the new AS system, they should do maybe a small exam out of the three on grammar, and then we would have the basis then for all our work on literature…

R So if your A Level teacher said well there is some grammar but it's just a small part of it, you wouldn't be put off?

C But if I'd known we were going to do a module on it at uni, it would probably have been wise to do something on it at A Level

R One of the things that's been said a lot over the years about A Level is that it should at least start as one subject and everyone should have an introduction to both language and literature, and then you can go your own different ways if you want to specialise, so that kind of ties in with what you seem to be saying.

A Even though I haven't always enjoyed doing it, it has actually been quite useful, like I can see how when I'm writing about poems particularly, we'll use loads of the stuff we've learnt, so…

R That's something else I wanted to ask – whether now you're doing it, you can see what the benefits are going to be or why it's useful, why you're having to do it. Any comments about that – how you find it useful, or why it might be useful?….

B It kind of adds another dimension to how you think of things, if you see what I mean – I've found it changes my reading a little bit…

R Has anyone found that at any point they're sitting there thinking what's this for, why do I need to know this, how does it connect…?

H Yes, I thought that when we were having a lecture and it was all about the sounds in that funny language… you know (general agreement)

C You mean the one on Anglo-Saxon, the very first one?

H No…

R Do you mean the phonetic alphabet?

H Yes, that's it, that did go over my head a bit.

R Any other issues when you wanted what is was for, why it was there?

C There was one where. I think she was going on about pauses; I think. I don't want to criticise her teaching, but it could have been done over five minutes, and she took a whole hour. I think it got to the point where a lot of people were just drifting off, whereas some of the lectures people do actually listen to!

D Like last week's was really good… (general agreement)

R The one about metaphor?

D She was really good. (general agreement).

A Because that was relevant: I could see how I could relate that to the stuff I write about.

D Field and tenor and all that.

H I think it's all got to do with the lecturer, how they keep you engaged.

R Right – that's one of the things I wanted to ask you about. Do you want to say more about that? You don't have to name names – although it will all be anonymous anyway – but what lectures have been successful, which ones haven't been, what's made them successful…?

D I think last week was the only one where I concentrated the whole way through, and understood everything she was saying really.

B Might that be 'cos it's quite a dry subject: it's hard to make grammar especially engaging, I suppose.

A I personally find things on overheads,,, if it's laid out.. if a definition is actually written out, I find that kind of easier to understand than if they read off a definition really quickly

C Yes, and someone coughs, and you've missed it… so annoying

B It's good when there's a kind of outline for the lecture on the OHP or on a handout, you know, just with the bullet points for the main features, because you can go back and remind yourself of it.

R So what things did last weeks' lecturer do that other lecturers don't…?

A She outlined what she was she going to say, didn't she…

D Yes, she repeated what she was going to say, too…

C (inaudible)

D She seemed much more on our wavelength … she was getting us involved…

C Yeah, with a big group that's quite hard to do…

D And it was the whole way she talked as well…to keep you… (agreement) …because sometimes, you know they don't seem to be talking to you

R You mean even if they're using language you can completely understand…

D Yes, sometimes you can…

R … but sometimes it doesn't seem to be directed to you, is that what you're saying?

D Yes, and sometimes you don't quite know what they're trying to get to…

C That thing about… that bloody conversation… the cashier (general laughter)… actually I looked back and I didn't know what he was trying to say. (general agreement) It was so short and so odd…

H Sometimes it can be something really simple…

D Yes, they try and explain it so well that you wonder well what am I missing because they're going into so much detail?

A Last week, we had to discuss what we thought the metaphors were with the person next to us – that was like a bit of making us think, you know…

R Sure - lectures can be just an hour of…

A Yes, you switch off…

R So what you're saying is that – first of all, the fact that she said what the structure of the lecture was going to be was helpful; second, the fact that when she made important points, she kind of repeated them, gave you time to write them down and indicated that they were important points; thirdly – that she engaged students in some activity that made them actually work on the topic themselves during the lecture; and – have I missed anything?

A …just using visual aids…

R Yes, using visual aids to make a summary of some of the important points to help you.

B I don't know if that comes down to the fact that we don't know what's important to the course, but they do, so we don't know what we need to write down and how much detail…

D Yes, they need to explain what's important…

B That does interest me, yes. Anyone want to say more about that?

E I find it quite hard that we have no ideas what an exam question will look like… like at A Level, you always have an idea from the start

C If they hadn't have given us like a past paper grammar thing this afternoon, I wouldn't have known what to do…

R It's good that they have done that, isn't it? But you're saying you'd like more of a vision of where it's all going?

B We're not sure what's expected of us, I think, in a way…

R Kind of on that point, but going back to last week's lecture, I noticed that one other thing she did was to explain to you how the first lecture was going to be connected

with the second… (general agreement)… and maybe that's got something to do with what you've just been saying about wanting to know where things are going? How much do you feel you have a grasp of why you're doing one topic one week and another the next week, or how the lectures interconnect?

A yes, I was thinking that all the bits of reading that we've had to do in English have all been really separate – I mean we've had to do stuff about grammar, stuff about reading different poems, and then this week's reading was about drama, film and tv or something, and there doesn't seem to be – I haven't seen any real links yet – but it might just be that they're teaching us lots of different things so that we can draw it all together in our essays…

B But they're using the same poems and stuff…

A Yes that's true…

B In the readings for different weeks, so you can see how different aspects to the same texts…

C I really like last week how she actually took a poem, I like the way she analysed it, and I thought, yes, we're doing a poem, and how the first lecture actually did relate to it, and put it into context, for example.. (general agreement)

R Right, so that's another thing she did differently from previous lectures, whereas previous lecturers used a poem simply as an example of what they were talking about, she actually talked about what she wanted to and then showed you how it might work in a poem, but looked at the poem in a *literary* way – is that what you're saying? (general agreement) And you thought that was a good move? Anyone want to say anything else about the question of the direction things are going in, or the shape of the course?

….. *(a discussion about module choices, focussing on their uncertainties about the overall shape of the course and their need for more guidance on how to construct/shape a course)*

R Thinking about the difference between what you did at A Level and what you're doing now… some of you said that you wouldn't have done A Level if you had thought there was going to be grammar in it. Does that apply to this course? When you applied to this course …is what you're doing now what you expected? General murmurs of 'No") Has it changed your view in any way, and how?

E I thought it would be more like reading a book and writing essays on it.. (general murmurs of 'Yes')

R Does everyone agree with that?

G Because I did English Language, I knew most English degrees would be mainly Literature so I hunted one out that had some language.

B I think the degree is titled English Studies rather than English Literature, though isn't it?

A Yes – I think I kind of forgot that, though … that it would have an English Language side to it

H My UCAS adviser said – when I asked if English Studies would be different from English Literature – that he didn't think so…

R So perhaps if I went round and found out how you did make that choice…

… (*each student says something)*

R So although some of you were aware that it's an English Studies course rather than an English Literature course, nevertheless most of you are still a bit surprised that it's so different from an English Literature course, and several of you have expressed disappointment because of that. Those of you who are disappointed, do you feel that it's just a question of waiting for this bit to be over?

C Well you have got to cover the basics, haven't you?

A And we know that later on we'll be doing modules like Victorian Literature which we would probably expect to be doing, you know, normally…

… *(a few minutes' discussion of different approaches to teaching and learning at A Level and university, focusing on greater independence and responsibility for learning, less contact time with teachers, difference in relationship with university teachers and school teachers, etc.)*

R I want to ask one more question about the lecture last week. It's quite interesting to me that you all seemed to think that that lecture was better, and I can see why many reasons why that would be the case. It did actually strike me that what she was saying last week was actually more difficult than what some of the previous lecturers had said, and there were bits where wondered to what extent you were grasping what she was saying. Now you said that you had grasped a lot of it better because of the context she put it in, but were there times during last week's lecture when you felt you weren't quite sure about what was going on?

A The stuff about identity…

C Some of the concepts…

B I did Sociology so some of the ideas of self and so on were a bit easier for me to understand.

A I was surprised because I expected it to be about metaphor but it was all about identity…

D I don't know how they were really related- it suddenly came out of nowhere

A Yeah

R And even though she'd said what the lecture was about, and you were clear about that, there was still something you weren't quite…

A It wasn't what I thought of as English…

R She mentioned… she was the first lecturer to use phrases like 'theory' and 'post-structuralism' and 'psychoanalytic criticism' didn't she? What was going through your minds when she talked about those things?… (laughter)… Did you kind of understand the gist of things she was saying even though you weren't quite sure...?

D Yeah, from the context…

A Bits of it I didn't understand, but…

R And those concepts like 'psychoanalytic criticism' and 'literary theory' – were they concepts you've been introduced to at all?

D I've heard them mentioned.

C … I don't think I could explain them properly

E We did something on different views…

R So you looked at different types of criticism?

E Sort of… very briefly

C Actually, we did look at some critics and what they actually thought of … like we looked at Malcolm Bradbury, and one of our teachers was really into critics and used to photocopy masses and masses of essays people had written on books … but I don't know, is that what 'post-….'?

R Well, it's related – different critics come from different angles with different perspectives, and sometimes they come from very theoretical perspectives, like psychoanalysis or post-structuralism..

C Are there feminist ones too?

R Yes

C Yes, we had a list of these positions

B As I say, I did Sociology at A Level, and I found that quite useful for English at the time as well, but now thinking back, a lot of it was along those lines – different critical views, because you have all these sociological theories from different perspectives, and it's useful to get into the habit of thinking that there are different interpretations of the same thing.

R So you did that in Sociology but not in English?

B Not as such, no. There were aspects of it, more simple aspects of it like feminist perspectives – I mean, because I did it in more depth in Sociology, that helped.

R OK – two questions, then: was anybody else introduced to critics, did you read the work of any critics?

H Yes, I think it was part of the syllabus … I can't remember what it was called … we had to do it…

R So you did read the work of other critics as part of that?

D I think we had to do it for Othello…

R And you did it simply to discuss someone else's views of the play?

D Yes

B Thinking about it, we did a lot of alternative stuff in our A Level, we did women Romantic poets and we did Victorian poets, too, and I think it was all tied into that …

different perspectives.. there was the idea of how they were received at the time, and we did a thing a couple of weeks ago about the housemaid that wrote poetry, and we covered that too…

R You mentioned the idea of Sociology being useful. Does anyone else feel that their other A Levels are coming in useful for the stuff you're doing now?

C I think doing Philosophy was useful, and also theatre Studies where we did a lot of stuff on Shakespeare.

D French…

A Yes that's right, language for the whole grammar thing… because you know all the tenses and so on…

C Yes, the foreign students in the lectures probably understand all the grammar better than we do because when they learn English they do the grammar…

R OK. How do you feel about the orals that are coming up in a few weeks?

C Relieved that they'll be one-to-one – I was reading what they say about them in the handbook, the criteria and so on, why they do the time test, the oral and the coursework this term, and I think they were trying to emphasise that they weren't they're trying to scare us: I know it's not the most appealing things…

B I think it's really useful to have to do an oral presentation because I think a lot of people are really nervous about speaking in general and I think it's useful to train people they need training, for the workplace and so on – it's almost like a practical aspect.

R That reminds me of another question I wanted to ask – about the classes. We've talked about the lectures, but not the classes. How do you feel about them?

… (*discussion about classes – focuses on the fact that there isn't much discussion in class because 'you can't really discuss grammar'; also how little seems to be covered in one 50 minute session weekly)*

R Final question – about enjoyment: how much enjoyment are you getting out of the study so far?

C Great novelty at the moment… quite cool

H I'm kind of sitting out this module hoping things are going to get better

B I agree with that, perhaps, realising that this isn't what it's always going to be like, and I ooking forwards to what's coming next…

G Well, I quite look this part of it because I've done a lot of it at A Level already, which gives me confidence

R Do you expect … when you applied, was enjoyment of the subject important to you? (general agreement).

C You've got to enjoy what you go to university to do. I wouldn't do Mathematics!

B You've got to be able to motivate yourself to read something… (general agreement).

R So why do some people choose mathematics? Because they enjoy it?

C And they're good at it.

D If you're good at it, perhaps you enjoy it more.

R So ability and enjoyment go together. Do you think people enjoy maths in the same way that people doing English enjoy English?

B I don't know because they might see it more as a means to an end… because you don't go home and look at sums, do you?

A One of my friends loves Maths and hates English because he thinks in English there's not a right answer or a wrong answer… it's too vague, whereas he loves the maths because you work it out, you get it right… that kind of side of it, which I can't understand.

C A lot of my friends say that they couldn't fill a page of A4 – that scares them, a blank page.

R These questions are where I'd like to start next time. I'd like to talk about the subject, literature in particular and how it relates to language, and about what you're learning and what you want to learn, and why you enjoy it, and the differences between reading and studying literature,

vii) Focus Group: individual interviews, Term Two - Billy

R Researcher
S Student

R: Can you start by telling me a little bit about how you feel about this module?

S: Um, well, I just don't know where it's going, really – I'm just getting really confused with all the sort of terms and stuff…

R: Right. Is it not what you expected?

S: Yeah, it's still not what I expected.

R: Right, so last term wasn't what you expected in terms of an English course, and neither is this term?

S: The first seminar I thought it was going to be, you know, when we did My Last Duchess, and I thought, oh yeah maybe it's going to be what I wanted it to be… I dunno – just in the seminars when she sort of tells us to get in groups and stuff, I don't know really what's happening – everyone else does apart from me, I think that's what I find…

R: Do you think so? What evidence do you have for that?

S: I dunno – everyone, you know, when she asks their groups to say what they found, people seem to be able to – I mean, in our group it's only Matt seems to know what 's going on…

R: And when you have your discussions in your group, with Matt there – what do you talk about, I mean do you find that Matt explains things – or are you all feeding in?

S: No it's mainly just Matt talking – I mean the other girl – can't remember what her name is – she doesn't seem to have a clue what's going on either…

R: So it's not just you? (Laughter) Don't you think there are a few other students in a similar position to you?

S: Well, perhaps they're able to blag it, I dunno! (Laughter)

R: So – what – I mean, did you have any expectations of this term? You know – what were they and how have they been disappointed – if you say they were?

S: Well, I didn't really think about this term much over Christmas – you know, it was just going back to uni, so when I went to the first seminar, it was more sort of what I –you know in the first seminar I probably spoke more than I have in any of the others, so I thought it was going to be something I was more comfortable with, sort of, but it's turned out to be – I mean, that's probably my fault, too – I mean I have been trying to do the reading, but because I find it quite tough, you read the first page and then the mind wanders.

R: Yeah, can you say what it is about the reading that you find difficult?

S: I think the Rivkin and Ryan is so … I don't understand why they expect us to read it – because the terms and so on – it's just too complex, in my opinion… so…

R: Have you read anything like it before?

S: No no – no – I just kind of get lost in it. So I have to refer back to Rob Pope's book.

R. Right – and do you find that useful?

S: I find that, yeah, I mean when I was doing my essay especially… I used that and some other resources in the library

R: So in other words you went and looked up some of the ideas that you're meant to be understanding, and you looked them up in more accessible texts. And did you find that helped?

S: Yeah, to a certain extent, I mean it gave me an easier way to write the essay (inaudible…)

R: So it's not necessarily the ideas that are the problem, it's the book – is that right?

S: Yeah, I mean take 'defamiliarisation' and stuff like that, you know when I read Rob Pope's notes on it it became a bit clearer, and I could use that idea in my essay, whereas previously when I read it from that, I just couldn't get it at all…

R: What about the lectures?

S: Um… I don't know really, I just write down what's on the board, I sort of copy what they do on the board and read over my notes, but it doesn't really go in, and so I re-read it later…

R: Although there's a difference isn't there between the lectures, I mean some of the ones – you're talking mostly about the ones that are to do with theory?

S: Yeah, I mean the Othello one I found fine.

R: What about The Waste Land?

S: When I re-read the notes on that, it sort of became clearer – it was a bit complex – but no it's the literary theory I find… whereas talking about Othello and so on is OK.

R: Say something more about the seminars. You were saying that you felt a bit lost and didn't know what was going on?

S: It's like she asks us to do a certain thing – no, I mean she asks us to look at something, but I don't know what she wants us to say, that's my – but if there's a set question, like, I always find myself turning to somebody and saying well what are we actually meant to be looking for?

R: Right, so you feel that the questions are perhaps sort of open-ended?

S: Yeah, they're just a bit vague at times, I mean – maybe if I put more effort into the reading they'd become a bit clearer – but I mean I have been trying…

R: Do you find the reading for English more difficult than for the other subjects?

S: Yeah, probably. I mean History, I think's probably even easier than this – you know it's just events, facts, and so on, which I've always been quite good at sort of memorising…

R: What's the history course you're doing this term?

S: The Age of Revolutions - so that's more about the facts – but with this – well, you've got to use your brain (laugh)… it's quite difficult!

R: And are you having to deal with anything like theory in any of your other modules or …?

S: No – the Sociology one is really just covering what I was doing at AS level, the foundations of social theory – you know the facts of Marx, I suppose - and the Renaissance – that's more and less facts too, and maybe a bit of analysing reading – that's not too bad, that's quite easy.

R: So what do you think this module is trying to achieve?

S: (Laugh) I have absolutely no idea at the moment! Well, I guess it's to make you more aware of the theory behind literature…

R: Why?

S: To examine the texts further… I mean it's just more complex than A Level isn't it? A Level was just, I mean you went in your class and analysed the texts and that was it, you never involved these concepts – and that's where I'm getting a bit confused…

R: Um, yeah, I'm trying to think whether you feel you've been given an explanation for why you're doing it this way rather than more like the way you did it at A Level – I mean do you feel they've explained that at all?

S: They haven't at all – I think we've just been thrown in to this, which is still probably a lot more language-based, I guess…

R: Last term, you said that you didn't like it but you could understand why it was happening…

S: Yes, kind of, to a certain extent - I could understand that to analyse a text there were certain things you would need to know … and I kind of understand why they need to do it, but I just can't get it round my head that when I put my name down for this course I thought it was going to be more like A Level… I mean, I really should know that uni's different to A Level, but I didn't really make that distinction at the time…

R: Do you think you're learning anything from this term? I mean, what do you think you're learning from it?

S: I dunno really – I don't think I'm learning much, to be honest. I just sort of - I feel as though I'm just - I go through the essay and then that'll be it for another term, and if I manage to pass it, luckily, then, I do, – so, sort of like, last time I got a C, I sort of scraped it I guess, and that was good enough for me, I was quite happy with that, so if I get a C this time, that's fair enough.

R: So tell me about writing the essay last week

S: Last week? I dunno really – I went to the library and I sort of got a few books and I read over the notes and I was able to get some stuff in that I relevant, but at the same time I didn't know if it was what they wanted – I mean there was no set question, so I didn't really know what they were looking for…

R: Which bit did you choose for the close reading?

S: Othello – because I'd done that back in A Level, so I thought I'd have a better knowledge.

R: And how did you manage?

S: What I wrote I thought was all right, but as I say I don't know if it's what they're looking for.

R: What theory or theories did you use?

S: I don't know – I didn't really know if they wanted us to do something like last term, but with the concepts on top, like 'defamiliarisation' 'sign and signifier', – I mean I got stuff like that in – but I don't know if I had the right idea with it.

R: OK. What do you think about the texts you've been looking at this term?

S: Oh – I thought The Waste Land was quite weird. Othello was fine.

R: And those are the only two you've done so far…OK. So tell me about The Waste Land. Have you done anything like The Waste Land before?

S: No, it seemed really scattered and sort of confusing.

R: What sort of poetry had you done at A Level?

S: First world war poetry, which I enjoyed…

R: So what did you think of what [name of lecturer] was saying in his lecture about Eliot having written The Waste Land shortly after the first world war poetry, but that it was obviously very different? Did you find that – his explanation of the relationship between the first world war poetry and what Eliot was writing interesting?

S: To be honest, I didn't really think about it very much – I mean I do remember that he said it was written after the first world war, but I didn't really… I mean the thing was that with the first world war poetry, you knew what was going on because there was only one subject, whereas TS Eliot was writing from his head… you know what I mean … you could analyse the war poetry a lot easier…

R: What do you mean by 'he was writing from his head'?

S: I dunno really – I mean like Wilfred Owen wrote from what he saw, and what he believed this whole thing was, sort of, about… whereas TS Eliot's writing about his own thoughts, and subjects that it's harder to …

R: Do you feel that you're expected to like the literature that's set?

S: Um, yeah, to a certain extent, I suppose…

R: Do you like it?

S: Well, I didn't really get into The Waste Land… Othello I've always enjoyed, I thought it was a really good play… that's it – what else are we doing? Oh I've read a bit of Frankenstein which seemed quite good… but I've seen the film first

R: And the first world war poetry that you did at A Level – you like that, did you?

S: Yeah

R: Can I ask you what 'liking literature' means to you? Does it mean that you would go away and read more of the same, or similar?

S: I would read more of the first world war poetry. I wouldn't really go out of my way to do it, but if I was looking for a book in the library and I came across one, I might read a couple out of interest – but I wouldn't go out of my way…

R: So, with a text like The Waste Land, I mean in the seminar, Lynnette said something like that when she first read it, she thought it was really amazing and she'd never read anything like it, and she wanted to find out more about it, and really get into it…. Did you feel at all the same way about it?

S: No – it didn't really strike me like that – but I don't know if I read the first few lines and found it a bit confusing and my brain sort of went, well that's not that interesting – I don't sort of get it…

R: Do you feel –going back to the question of whether you're expected to like it …

S: I just feel that they expect us to know it…As English uni students, they sort of expect us to understand it straight away…

R: And do you think other students do?

S: Yes, I'm pretty sure yeah, a few other students will grasp the concepts a bit more – there are some that sort of don't.

R: So why do you think they expect you to know it when clearly what you're saying is that you don't?

S: I dunno – that's just what comes across – because she splits us into groups and expects us to have mind-blowing thoughts, and to me – well, the topic of discussion is a bit vague in my opinion.

R: So can you tell me what you think might help, given that you came into first year university having done A Level – so you did some Shakespeare, you analysed a play in a fairly straightforward way, you'd done some reasonably straightforward poetry and you'd analysed that again in a relatively straightforward way. You'd learnt a bit about the historical background of the things that you'd studied, and you'd written some essays. Can you tell me what you think it missing from the stuff you're doing here… what would you have needed to do before doing this, or what would you need to do instead of doing this?

S: I dunno – I mean the thing was, I was never that interested in poetry and literature, I did it because I was good at it at GCSE – I got an A* - and then I did it at A Level because I was good at doing it – I was always able in the exams to come out with the grades. I dunno why – I mean there was no great sort of longing to do it at all, but I did it at uni because I thought it would just us open up more doors than doing something I really wanted to do which was to go to college and do a music conversion (?) course, but that's something I could do in my spare time…

R: What I'm saying is that you were quite good at it…

S: Yeah but I had no great longing to do it…

R: If you were good at it at school, though, you might expect…

S: .. to be good at it here?

R: Yes!

S: I know! That's what's sort of struck me the most, because I thought I'd come in and be all right – and to a certain extent, I mean as I say, I passed last term, but… I dunno…

R: The other thing is you say that at school, you were good at it, but you didn't have a great desire to do it, but you found it interesting…

S: Uh – yes – to a certain extent…

R: You found it interesting enough to get involved in it, to get engaged with it…

S: Yes, I mean the first world war poetry and the Shakespeare, I did find them very interesting…

R: So is one of the reasons why you're not really getting on with it now is because you have some ability but not enough interest… or is that not how you see it?

S: yeah, it might be the interest – but at A level it just came much more naturally, whereas this is not coming naturally. I mean, also, because I don't know many people in the seminar classes or anything like that, then the atmosphere doesn't create a very… I mean you know at school, it was all comradeship, you all knew each other, you had a laugh, you were not afraid to speak out – whereas here it's very different.

R: OK. I just want to go back briefly to The Waste Land. Can you give me a sense – I mean if you'd been given that poem to study, say at A Level, do you think there's a chance that you might have found it interesting?

S: Um…

R: If it had been given to you in completely different circumstances?

S; I might have done, yes, because I would have been able to talk about it with other students, so it would have been easier to get to know…

R: What about the teacher, what might the teacher have done differently?

S: Well, it would have been clearer, because she would have been telling you – whereas here you have to get in your groups and sort of discuss it…

R: Did you never discuss thing in groups then?

S: Well. we did to a certain extent – but I mean when we did Shakespeare, I remember the teacher would just relay the information, and she'd give us like a scene each a week, I think, and then we had to do a kind of presentation on it, and we'd kind of discuss it.

R: What kind of presentation did you give?

S: Um – I dunno – just very sort of – picking out certain lines and analysing them , and that was it really…

R: Analysing it how?

S: Well, just sort of saying their meaning… and what the writer was trying to get at…

R: And presumably relating them to the play as a whole, and the way the characters…

S: Yes

R: Did you ever do any discussion of the historical background to Othello or anything like that?

S: Yes, we did in the first few classes, sort of, you know, about what the time was like, and about the whole sort of background to you know the Turks and so on - yeah, to a certain extent.

R: But on the whole, you felt that what you did in lessons was about sort of understanding the meaning of the lines…

S: Yes, sort of understanding the meaning of the text.

R: What about the poetry?

S: I dunno – it was the same sort of thing – I dunno – that was just sort of like analysing, there were no difficult things to engage in…

R: So you'd get a sense of what each poem meant – and you'd look at the various techniques…

S: Yeah, yes things like rhyme scheme, alliteration, but we'd just touch on it briefly – I mean in my A Level essays I don't think I wrote that much about it.

R: So in the A Level essays you would write about the … what would you write about in the essays on the poems?

S: I would just analyse the text, but I don't remember using many of the key terms…

R: So you'd talk through the poem explaining what the poet was trying to get at…?

S: Yes

R: And you'd mention maybe some of the language that was being used…?

S: Yeah, yeah, I suppose I touched on it

R: So what I was trying to get at was, if you'd adopted a similar approach here to The Waste Land, do you think you'd have found that you would have been able to get somewhere with that poem, find it interesting, to engage with it?

S: Kind of, but I think that in the back of my mind is that I have to try and include all the concepts that are mentioned there in it, rather than just looking at it and – I mean I could interpret it in my own way – fine – but then I get stuck on that's not what they're looking for.

R: OK. So. Great – good. So … I think that's probably all – that's been very helpful – you can see what I'm trying to get at?

viii) Focus group: individual interviews - Matt

R Researcher
S Student

R: I'd just like to know how you feel about this term so far, the module

S: I've definitely found it more interesting – and it seems odd because it's not exactly more accessible – it's almost more difficult – and I think a lot of people including myself are finding it difficult, putting aside all the things that we've been taught to look for before, and applying these theories which are all fairly new to us I think, but it's definitely been more interesting, I think perhaps because we've been looking at texts that are more familiar, not necessarily because we've read them before but because they're types of texts we're used to working with, rather than shopping lists and conversations and things

R: So you're quite positive about it, would you say?

S: I think so, yes… it's difficult to know whether, I think you could think you have a good grasp of these theories and so on, but you could be quite wrong, so you have to be kind of tentative – but I think it's going well.

R: OK How did you feel about the essay?

S: I think it was OK, but as I say I wouldn't like to say for definite and find out I've completely missed the mark.

R: Do you feel you're learning from this experience?

S: Definitely, I mean I was aware of the concept of critical theories – that there were different ones, and how different ones can shed a light on a text – I learnt it from Sociology really, because that was much the same thing, and I think maybe that's helped me a bit, but

R: what would you say you are learning?

S; I think it's the bit that people are finding most difficult which is the focus of it, which is the idea that putting aside all everything you've learnt before is much like putting aside the bias in a sort of editorial piece or journalistic piece, and perhaps it's that kind of thing that's the sub-text of the module – but I don't know…

R: right – so you can detect a sub-text in the module, is that what you're saying?

S: Well you could argue that there might be one there, without reading too much into it…

R: OK – but what about the text of the module – is that not what you're describing as a sub-text?

S: Yes, well, it's 'texts, problems and approaches', so I suppose it' about different approaches…

R: It's interesting that you initially identified it as a sub-text…

S: I think it's because you forget about the module title and so on, and the lectures and so on become more insular, until they all join up…

R: So what you're saying is that there's a bigger picture that each of the seminars and lectures fits into… but that you feel that to a certain extent that bigger picture is getting lost, or isn't there, or…?

S: Well I think as we were saying last term that, as you get towards the end of the term, you can see more how what we've learnt before is important, because we couldn't understand how we'd be applying it at the beginning, and I think it's a similar progression this term.

R: OK, so, you say that you're having to sort of put aside ways that you thought about things before and to think about things in new ways. Do you think that has been communicated to you by the teachers a s one of the purposes of this module.

S: I think the focus has been on different forms of interpretations and that in order to see that they're different you have to look at them separately rather than in combination…

R: OK and what about the literary texts that you've been studying this term? How do you feel about those and the way they've been covered?

S; I think it's interesting that we've looked at two metaphysical poets so far, but we haven't looked at the whole idea of metaphysical poetry, and that was something I expected, and I don't actually know anything about it… but perhaps that's because that's not what this is to do with necessarily…

R: And they were two of the choices for the close reading?

S: I think it's interesting also that the texts all seem to provoke responses. I read Frankenstein over the break and thinking about in that sort of way you can definitely see it – I don't know if you'd have to call it proto-feminist ideas and that sort of thing - and I think perhaps they've been chosen to provoke specific responses, or to have specific things that critical theories could look at in them, for us to find easy in them…

R: And Othello would fit into that?

S: Yes

R: What about The Waste Land?

S: I don't know so much – I mean perhaps that's chosen because there's been so much done on it, I mean everyone had a different idea about it, and perhaps that's why?

R: How did you feel about The Waste Land as a literary text and what was your reaction to it, and the way you covered it as well?

S: Um, I thought it was good that they didn't try and suggest any very specific ideas about it, that we weren't limited in our interpretation or told that we had to look at it in a certain way because it's so obscure really – it was interesting, but the things they focused on were different from the things I'd expected them to and perhaps the ones that struck me as more interesting, so I don't know if that was just because of differences in interpretation or what…

R: Just thinking about the text as a text that you read, rather than a text to study in class, how did you feel about it

S: Well again it was just interesting really – you almost have to hold back when you're reading it so that you don't try and read too much into it, and go off in all sorts of fanciful ideas in all sorts of different directions – it's quite easy to do that, really. It was interesting reading the notes, too, and realising that they were quite obscure too, and reading it and thinking that

maybe it wasn't meant to be interpreted in that sort of way at all. It just … interests me, makes you think.

R: So you're drawing an opposition between reading something and reading things into it, and reading things just to see what effect it has on you… Do you think that's how it's meant to be read…? How is it meant to be read?

S: I really wouldn't like to say… just because so many people disagree. I mean there's the idea of authorial intent, and then there not being any intent, the intentional fallacy, so it just leaves it – you can't say either why. It's interesting that with the introduction of these theories we seem to understand less because nothing can be clear-cut.

R: That's interesting. Did you like The Waste Land?

S: I suppose so. I don't dislike it. I'm just trying to think of a situation in which I'd think to read it…

R; That's a good question.

S: Kind of what sort of emotional response does it give you?

R: Is it something that could be enjoyable as a pure read, that you might just pick up and read it and enjoy it?

S: I don't know – I don't think it's the sort of thing I'd read before bed, because you'd just sit there thinking, but what about that, what does he mean by that? - I suppose so, especially if you're in that kind of mood – you might even find solace in it!

R: Do you think anyone read it for pleasure or enjoyment – I mean, who would have read it when it was originally written?

S: I don't know – I suppose it could have embodied the spirit of the time, about the war and so on – disenchanted people, perhaps.

R: So do you think it would have made more 'sense' to people reading at the time?

S: Possibly – I mean maybe I'm just too optimistic – perhaps that adds several layers of obscurity to it, that we don't think the same way.

R: OK, and going back to the question of who do you think would have read it?

S: Um, specifically, I don't know – probably people who would have been revolutionaries if they'd lived in France in 1780 –

R: What do you mean?

S: Well, going back to disenchanted people, I think they must have felt that it was time for a regime change or something…

R: OK, so you're saying that it potentially has a great deal of political significance?

S: Possibly in that it's politicians that are responsible for the state of the affairs, and so if that's the state the world's in, it must be their fault. In that respect – I can't really think of anything which is specifically targeted but..

R: So sticking with this question of who read it, you say possibly people with revolutionary ideas. Can you be a bit more specific about who might come across such a poem, what kind of people might come across or pick up such a poem, how they might be exposed to it?

S: (Pause). It all depends on… what was the date… 20s / 30s … I can just imagine flappers running round… surely that would be the audience? The wealthy and educated, and in their social activities they were against the authorities of the time –it's not something I know a lot about though.

R: What makes you feel that the people with access to it would be educated and wealthy?

S: Just because that's traditionally been the audience of poetry and high culture – that's who it appeals to.

R: So do you think the same people would read the first world war poetry that you studied and TS Eliot?

S: It's quite possible, since the war poets and Eliot were roughly the same class.

R: Do you think that people then would have understood the poem?

S: Difficult to say – what is the intention of it? Perhaps because their sensibilities would have been similar, living at the same sort of time, they would have had a better understanding?

R: Thinking still about that poem, but thinking now, sort of 70 years on, who reads it now, who might read it now?

S: Students and people that write letters to The Times! Um - Well in theory anyone who'd be interested…

R: Do you think people might be interested in the same… I mean, yes people who are studying it, students of English literature, sure, they're going to read it, but thinking of people who aren't students of English literature – who would be likely to read it and why? Would they read it for the same reasons as people 70 years ago?

S; I don't know, to be perfectly honest. (Pause). I mean lots of people are interested in psychology these days – perhaps it's those kinds of people it would appeal to – because it deals with areas they're interested in …

R: You mean the imagery…?

S: Yes, and people's responses to it, because it's not all direct is it? – otherwise I don't know really.

R: And what do you think make sit the kind of text that makes it suitable for study on the course. It was the first major text you studied on the course…

S: I dunno. It had quite a significant impact, didn't it, on poetry at the time – amongst critics and so on, it was a quite significant departure from the traditional style, and so on, and as it's exclusively traditional poetry that we've almost exclusively studied so far, perhaps it's just to introduce us to other things…

R: Is that true, that it's traditional poetry you've almost exclusively studied so far…?

S: Well I suppose there was the Caribbean poetry, which is different but that was more of a variation than a departure – I don't know – I haven't read much of epic poetry, so I don't know if it relates more to that style, which I think it perhaps does.

R One of the things that lies behind my questions is trying to understand the difference between reading a poem for pleasure, which presumably is why poems were originally written – they weren't written to be studied generally speaking– and therefore pleasure seems to be an important aspect of them: the difference between that and studying a poem - and one of the things I'm trying to sort of get at is how you see that difference?

S: I suppose reading a poem for pleasure and relating that to the choice of poem, I suppose you'd read a specific poem because you desire the emotional response that specific poem would give you, whereas, so, unless what you actually want to get out of the poem is what there is in The Waste Land, then you're not going to read it for pleasure. Whereas studying it, we're almost identifying these things and the different elements almost to get a better understanding of which poems we prefer to read in different situations – does that make sense?

R: Yes, it does. So when I asked you if you liked The Waste Land, you said it was interesting – do you – we talked a bit about this last term, but thinking again based on your experience this term – do you generally get the feeling that you're expected to either like, or love, or find interesting, or all three, the texts that you study?

S: I don't think it would necessarily matter that we didn't like them, because I think they're chosen to trigger some kind of response, not just to be indifferent, so - I suppose you could say that ideally we would be intended to like them or love them or find tem interesting but even to dislike them, you have to have a reason for disliking them, so that's another way of talking about them. I think perhaps that should be included as well.

R: Do you feel that there's ever any pressure from teachers to respond in a particular way – or to appreciate a text in a particular way - or from the course? Do you think they expect you to like the texts?

S: (Pause) Well, I guess so, I think … (inaudible) across thousands of years, so it must be good, so I think they must expect us to like them, but I don't know whether I've felt any pressure to do so… um… I suppose we look more at ways of appraising texts, in a more positive sense than a general sense, so perhaps we could say that's an element of that.

R: Do you think the theories you've been studying this term can only be applied to good literary texts?

S: I think they can only be applied to literary texts, texts that display literariness – that's an odd word – good, in that I think that were amazingly ground-breaking or anything, I don't think so - in that lots of the theories use the concept of myths and folk tales and so on which aren't necessarily 'good' – a bit odd, written in the middle ages and so on…

R: Can you explain why myths and folk tales have come up so many times as part of the discussions on literary theory?

S: I think to reinforce the idea that here we have myths, and to reinforce the idea that the same myth pops up all around the world in different forms but actually it's the same idea, so it's not the story or what the characters do that matter, but the basic moral message, not the characters, but the essential meaning – that's I think the idea.

R: How do you feel about the seminars this term?

S: I think people are encouraged to speak out more than last term term, and I think people feel more confident to do so, and that's really the basis of the seminar…

R: Have you picked up a general feeling about the module from other students? Do you think others feel similar to you, or do they feel different about it?

S: I think people are enjoying it, even if only as a departure from what we did last term, because I think it was always going to be fairly dull, and I think they mentioned to us at the start that we weren't going to enjoy it tremendously, but it had to be done. I think everyone seems to be liking the idea of looking at proper texts as well – but I think once we have to start catching up on the reading and so on, I think maybe people won't like that so much.

R: What do you think of the reading in Rivkin and Ryan?

S: It is quite dense, but I think even if you're reading along and it doesn't make much sense, I find that it formulates an idea in your head. I dunno – it takes me a while to fit it all together properly, but it's not too bad - though I do get confused when there's essentially the same idea being discussed by two different critics but then they're using different terms for the same things – like langue and parole, and sign and signifier, and that sort of thing, and you have to keep applying each to the other,

R: Can I ask you what sort of additional reading you've done?

S: I've been making use of a literary dictionary I've got at home, to make all of the definitions clear in my mind, so I don't have an ambiguous idea of the terms being used.

R: Anything else?

S: I've been looking back to Rob Pope's book definitely, because in much the same way the glossary there is very helpful – it's very good.

R: What about literary texts – anything additional?

S: I haven't had time, especially with the Renaissance module, there is quite a lot of reading there too, and there's quite a lot to do for history too.

R: OK. Have you got any – do you have any other sort of reflections on the difference between what you're doing now and what you did at A Level?

S: Um, well they did try to introduce the idea that there were other interpretations, but mainly it was just the idea that feminists disagreed with everything, I think, that's what they put across – but they definitely introduced the idea of different interpretations and different readings of texts but it just wasn't a focus, I think. But as I've said before, doing sociology, it just made that idea much more obvious to me, especially in media modules where you looked at ways different things can be interpreted differently, in the press for instance – of course that can be directly applied to literature.

R: Do you feel, based on your experience so far, that looking at the way the course is here and the way the course was at school, do you feel that the course at both levels is good, suitable, the right kind of thing, or do you feel that at either level, or at both levels, something could be being done differently?

S: I don't know, it's hard to – I mean – you get the impression that the idea of A Level English is to enable you to talk about English literature in A Level terms, at an A Level level, and that to try and introduce all this stuff – I mean it's a three year course this - to give you all the additional skills and then to get you looking at everything else as well, it might just give you a

kind of, I dunno, a semi-understanding of it, so that you'd be worse off perhaps, because you'd only be able to half discuss those things at that level, so I don't know whether it would be useful to introduce that stuff. I mean, considering that more and more people are going to university, and things like that, it might be worth introducing, but maybe it would be better to bring in a broader system, where different subjects enable you to transfer skills…

R: What about university level? You suggest that perhaps A Level should change to take into account what happens at university, but what about university? Should it take into account the reality of A Level more… or is it doing so?

S: Well it's been difficult but it's not been impossible, and they could be trying to instill a work ethic into us – so that we don't just go, 'oh we're at university, let's go and drink for the next three years' – so…

R: Some students don't feel happy because they had expected that English at university would be more like English at A Level and they still don't feel happy because they still want to do more of the sort of thing that they did at A Level.

S: I sort of feel that we have to do this bit first, so we can join it together…

R: So you see it as concept- and skill-gathering so that you can go onto another level so that when you go back to looking at literary texts in a more concentrated way, you will approach them with a new set of ideas?

S: And perhaps enjoy them more as a result.

R: OK.