

An Alternative Approach to ENG 1110 Introduction to the Study of Literature

Clayton G MacKenzie

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts

Preamble

Students entering the English Major are required to take an introductory course on the study of literature. Many of them have never studied literature before and lack the basic tools needed for literary analysis. Teaching these simple skills is a relatively easy matter but inculcating an enthusiasm for and an appreciation of great works in English is a more difficult task. Grasping the imagination of students on introductory literary courses – in whatever educational context – is no mean feat. The course ENG 1110 Introduction to the Study of Literature has been taught for many years in the English Department. Like most survey courses, it tries to balance the teaching of analytical skills with the need for students to step back and acquire an almost intuitive understanding of what constitutes great literature. As teachers, we are constantly swapping our pedagogical hats – at one moment we are technicians, at another literary evangelists. In my own case, sometimes these demands have been managed successfully and at other times less so. A question then arose: would an alternative approach to ENG 1110 offer a stronger and more consistent promise of pedagogical effectiveness? The project in question sought to explore a new way of approaching old content matter.

Abstract

The project sought to implement a different approach to the teaching of ENG 1110 Introduction to the Study of Literature (a required English Major course in Semester 1). Customary approaches to the course have employed period studies, concentrating on texts of a particular period. Instead of focusing on period, the alternative approach focused on literary type (i.e. genre or topic). In drawing on this alternative approach, I hoped to provide a more useful framework for the study of literature at the beginning of the 21st century, taking into greater account, for example, the influence of electronic and non-print forms of literature.

Keywords

Literature, survey, English, themes, Internet, multimedia

Introduction

The course *ENG 1110 Introduction to the Study of Literature* has been taught by me along traditional lines associated with a survey-type course. The progress of the course has typically involved a period-based text approach, in which texts are examined chronologically. This approach has been widely used in English departments and is effective. The present project took the form of an inquiry into other possible approaches, in particular, sought to make use of Internet resources to a far greater extent than has been the case hitherto in my teaching of *ENG 1110*. My revised approach, it must be stressed, remained within the parameters of the current approved course description. However, it distanced itself from the usual methods I had employed in teaching the course and sought to meet the course objectives through alternative pedagogical strategies and methodologies – involving extensive use of genre and topic (sometimes called "thematic" study) approaches.

Aims and Objectives

The project sought to achieve the following:

1. a practical and well-documented exploration and evaluation of alternative teaching methods for the course *ENG 1110 Introduction to the Study of Literature*;
2. the compilation of a repository of teaching materials relevant to *ENG 1110*; and
3. the production of an extensive resource booklet, detailing the teaching and other materials for *ENG 1110*.

Methodology

The project lasted for 15 months.

A course outline was presented to students at the outset and was open to some negotiation during the semester. The initial outline, and the subsequent adjustments to it, met the requirements of the relevant course document. It embraced a stronger genre and topic-oriented approach to literature, taking account of the diversity of literary form. A record was kept of the effectiveness or otherwise of teaching materials and approaches. Students were given opportunities to use the Internet to develop group and individual presentations on particular authors or modes of publication. Students were questioned (written and oral responses) near the outset, in the sixth week and at the end of the semester. The preliminary questioning was aimed at determining expectations of and attitudes towards the course. The mid-semester investigation sought to diagnose possible adjustments to be implemented during the second half of the course. The final questioning session sought to assess students' attitudes towards the learning

process and subject matter. A selection of students was interviewed at the end of the semester and questioned on their impressions of the content, structure and pedagogical implementation of the course. The progress of students was monitored through assessment procedures, including:

1. anonymous surveys to establish some indication of knowledge and conceptual proficiencies at various points in the course;
2. short answer and presentation assignments (to test knowledge and conceptual acquisition);
3. a term paper (to evaluate argumentative capabilities and conceptual grasp within a specific learning domain); and
4. a two-hour written examination (to assess students' abilities to detect thematic innuendo and referential significance in relation to unseen textual extracts).

Results/Findings

Instead of examining texts chronologically, the alternative approach focused on issues of theme and genre. It allowed the flexibility to range far and wide through the corridors of literature, garnering works that are related by the commonality of their form and by their content preoccupations rather than simply by their relative places on a time continuum. In addition, a much stronger emphasis was placed on visual and non-print media. With the assistance of a Project Assistant, an Internet site was

constructed and students were encouraged to interact with this site. In regular feedback sessions (conducted in both written responses and one-to-one oral interviews), students indicated that they valued this site highly and it had proved useful to their ongoing studies in *ENG 1110*. However, the site was not operational until fairly late in the first semester when the project started. So, for a time, there was a "credibility gap" – the promise of a site to come, but the absence of that site for a good deal of the semester.

Selection of students' comments (early in the course process and before the website was up and running):

You need to be slower. You are going too fast.

We don't have time to look at the Internet. We can use it but we need to see your website, when can it be finished?

I hope you can tell us more about the Western traditions and history.

Further instructions are needed on "stress" patterns.

Could you provide some notes before the lecture starts?

Since I haven't studied English Literature before, I am still puzzled and confused by this course and don't know how to study it well.

I don't think the website will be good. It is better to give us notes.

We are not familiar with this course so we need to have detailed explanations and notes.

Will we have some notes explaining the sonnet as we miss some points sometimes? Or where can we find these explanations?

Perhaps by providing more pictures or stories, you can make this lesson more interesting.

I think we can find some useful poems on themes on the Internet by using the search engine. But how do we know if a poem is suitable or not?

Selection of students' comments (during the course process but after the website was up and running):

You have improved a lot! You provide sufficient explanation (i.e. because of the website) and speak slower in class now.

Good way of presenting poems and novels but can you show us some diagrams...so that we can have a clearer picture in our mind?

I think you are perfect already!

It's good for you to prepare some notes for us. They are very helpful. Thank you.

I enjoy studying this class very much. It is not necessary to speak slower. I can hear you clearly. Try to meet the class schedule next time.

The website should have come sooner. It would be better to have it from the beginning but it is fine now that we can access it easily. It is all in one place.

I think you've been doing very well to help us. I have learnt something, from none to something. And you arouse my interest in English Literature.

The Internet webpage is useful. The website design is user-friendly and attractive.

Selection of students' comments (during the final stage of the course):

This course really arouse my interest in studying English Literature and the website is quite good to include some useful notes.

I don't have any background in studying English Literature before. However, when I study this course, I don't even find it hard and stressful. In fact, it's quite interesting.

I was given the opportunity to think freely. Interesting lectures and tutorials.

It has been successful to introduce the knowledge of English Literature to me and I know more about the cultural values and arts of Britain.

Notes are well organised and assignment instructions are clear so that students can follow the instructions and do the assignments correctly.

The stuff on the website is interesting.

This course does give me stimulation and inspiration and I like the website.

Somehow the course is a bit abstract that I am not able to handle it well and I don't know what to do for my revision since I didn't learn English Literature in secondary school. Those classmates who have learnt English Literature before may find the course much easier to follow and they have no problems in doing the assignments. But we all have to do the same assignments and are assessed in the same way. This may be unfair to those who had no idea of what English Literature is before. However, the lecturer has been fair in marking the papers overall.

It was worth emphasising that I was not claiming that my pedagogical methodologies were new but, instead, they constituted a departure from my own normative approaches to the teaching of the course. Over the last nine years, I had taught *ENG 1110 Introduction to the Study of Literature* on many occasions. I would like to offer a comparison of Teaching Evaluation scores (averages) over the last three occasions that I taught the course. The first example preceded the commencement of the TDG project. The second example was

taught early in the project, before the full dimensions of the website and non-print resources were in place. The third example was my most recent teaching of *ENG 1110*, implemented with the full array of resources enabled by the TDG available to it.

	Average score for Part I: Teaching Effectiveness	Average score for Part II: Course Assessment
(pre-TDG)	7.1	5.48
(early-TDG)	6.91	5.33
(late-TDG)	7.51	5.74

Though all of these scores were high, I would suggest that the initial hesitancy associated with the outset of any revised pedagogical strategy might have resulted in a slight fall in student satisfaction in the early phases of the TDG project. But once all resources (e.g. the website) were in place, student satisfaction came back strongly in the late-TDG and exceeded the high scores of the pre-TDG teaching of the course. Overall, on the basis of official evaluations and my own regular evaluations of project/students' progress, I believe it was fair to say that the course and students had benefited from the project.

A wide range of materials is now available for the teaching of *ENG 1110*. Purchased materials have been housed in the English Department's Multi-Function Room OEM1008. These include videos and textual resources. There is also an extensive resource booklet, detailing teaching and other materials for *ENG 1110*.

I have attached copies of some of the resources I prepared for the alternative teaching approach to *ENG 1110*. In practice, the website provided a central repository of many other resources and I have therefore attached copies of the home page and other sub-section header pages of the site.

Discussion

Any new approach to a course is naturally stimulating for the tutor implementing the project and, vicariously, for the students following the course (who are often aware that something different is happening). The great strength of the period approach is that it provides an historical and cultural background that usefully informs a range of literary materials that belong to that period. In largely submerging this approach and opting for a topic-based or genre approach, the teacher is losing this advantage to some degree. Studying, say, the sonnet (a topic or genre approach) across the centuries means that while there is a unifying force (the idea of the sonnet), the examples from different periods each requires a degree of background input to make it understandable and accessible to the students. In a sense, therefore, there is no escape from some forms of “period approach”, albeit its presence is in a muted and less obvious form. Nonetheless, as university English departments worldwide generally move away from author and period studies and into what many regard as the more interesting domain of topic and/or genre studies, this project I believe was both timely and important. It certainly

convinced me that period approaches to survey courses on English and other literatures are not a *sine qua non*. My natural inclination is towards this kind of approach, since I am interested in the social and historical background of literature and in how pieces from the same period knit into socio-literary tapestries of the time. Nonetheless, by undertaking the project, I forced myself to consider other ways of approaching texts, and found much to like and learn through this process.

Enhancement on Teaching and Learning

Any course we teach, we monitor closely. That is an important part of what is often called “reflective teaching” – teaching and reflecting upon the learning processes and outcomes of what has been taught. However, in an experimental course – and this was, for me, an experimental course – one is apt to study teaching and learning processes and their results with even greater circumspection and interest. I noticed clear development in what students were learning and in how effectively they were able to transfer their skills to different contexts. So, for example, genre-based approach to poetry allows me to focus on particular skills involved in poetic analysis. And I use the word “focus” deliberately. In period studies, there is a tendency to dilute poetic analysis (for example) over the wide range of the course. So, in the Renaissance period, we may look at Shakespearean poems; in the Romantic period, we may look at Keats’ poems; in the Modern period, we may look at Auden’s poetry; and

so forth. But if we focus on the poem as a genre, then in a single and concentrated span of teaching time, it becomes possible to achieve greater depths of study with regard to what a poem is and what its dimensions and techniques may be. Curiously, I found this process quite useful, as well, to period understandings since each poem brings with it its baggage of social and historical dispositions and it was of interest to compare, with some immediacy, the role of women (for example) in the poetry and times of Shakespeare with the role of women in the poetry and times of the twentieth century. The Internet and the resources I made available to students through the website were proved useful to this process.

I have no doubt that students were benefited from the enthusiasm and commitment with which I approached the topic and they certainly reciprocated. I was able to measure the quality of their skills and learning through the various assessment mechanisms I identified earlier in this report. I have already used the example of poetry, so perhaps I may take that example to push my point further. Normally, in a survey literature course, I would not be able to develop any great details in relation to the technical issue of "poetic metre". In the alternative approach, this became possible through the focused study of poetry. By the end of the course, students' technical knowledge of metre exceeded that of students in any previous years I have taught this course. This advance was verified through the final

written examination in which students were required to analyse an unseen poem and metre played a significant part in the effectiveness of the poem. Now, of course, something has to give. One cannot expect depth to be achieved in everything studied. I felt that my teaching of the short story was rushed. And generally, the students consistently felt that my pace during the course was too fast. Genre and/or topic approaches somehow lend themselves to greater depth but also lure the teacher into the trap of moving too quickly in order to traverse all that he or she feels needs to be traversed. In future offerings of the course, I opt to preserve the depth of study but to cover fewer topics. This may seem to constitute a narrowing of sorts but, on a survey course such as this, optimal depth of study and ideal width of study are surely not achievable in a single semester offering.

Limitations/Difficulties

I have mentioned the key difficulties already, but perhaps I could summarise them briefly below.

1. By focusing on in-depth study of genres and topics, there seemed to be less time available to roam across the full range of literatures. My attempt to do so resulted in a pace of teaching that the students often regarded as a little too fast for them.
2. The project began a month prior to the beginning of the semester. This meant that the development of a website, with the help of my Project

Assistant, could not be brought to fruition until mid-way through the semester. Students, who knew that the website was coming, felt a sense of frustration that it took so long to arrive.

3. The genre/topic approach still required "period" input (i.e. socio-literary and cultural studies) and my initial attempts to avoid this proved unsound and unfounded. In fact, genre/topic approach now seems to me a glean considerable benefit from some parallel comparative period discussion and study.

Conclusion

I am very much committed to the provision of a stronger technological basis for the teaching of *ENG 1110*. The study of literature in the 21st century must take greater account of the influence of electronic and non-print forms of literature and, equally, must make the presentation of literature more appealing and stimulating to young people in a highly computer-literate environment, such as Hong Kong. I have enjoyed the flexibility to range through the garden of literature, gathering works that are related by (for example) the commonality of their form or by their mutual interface with new computer-based technologies or by their content preoccupations – rather than simply by their relative places on a time continuum (i.e. the traditional period approach).

In moving away from the traditional period approach to literature, I have also learned much about the new forms of organisation and pedagogical presentation that have proved necessary to execute the alternative method to the course. This said, I remain convinced that the use of technology in the teaching of *ENG 1110* is not an end in itself. Non-print sources, such as the Internet, provide valuable resource pools for students but they can never supplant the teacher nor can they make amends for poor pedagogical strategies. Good teaching, it seems to me, must increasingly take account of, but not be subjugated by, the technological environment in which it exists. Technology is valuable as a tool to be used in an overall teaching approach to given subject matter but it cannot be allowed to dictate pedagogical processes.