

## ISSUES IN TEACHING LITERARY THEORY

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This paper is co-authored by Mick Burton, who has been at the centre of theory teaching at Worcester College of Higher Education since its first appearance in 1977, and Debbie Sly, who, as a student was on the receiving end of Mick's efforts, but who turned gamekeeper in 1993, when she joined the theory teaching team after post-graduate study at Birmingham. With David Roberts, we were involved with the transformation of the original final year compulsory theory element of the Combined Studies Literary Perspectives component into the English & Literary Studies Year 2 Mandatory<sup>1</sup> Module, Theoretical Perspectives.

Before embarking on a discussion of how best to teach literary theory, it would be useful to clarify why we teach it. The short but cynical answer is that we teach it because it's there. Theory is a fact of academic life, whether individual lecturers like (or 'do' it) or not, and if our students are to have any hope of understanding most of the criticism published since the late seventies, they will have to be introduced to it sooner rather than later. Indeed, theory teaching at WCHE had a distinctly ad hoc origin, in a question asked at the validation of what was then the new Combined Studies Degree, in response to which Mick created an instantaneous unit, complete with essay questions.

Any more idealistic claims are always at risk from the pervasive anti-humanist inflection of most recent developments in literary theory. Indeed, the subversion of the very concepts of 'literature,' 'knowledge,' and 'truth', and especially of the possibility of objective assessment (applying presumably as much to students' assignments as literary texts) places the topic on a potential collision course, not only with the stated aims and objectives which validate (in our case) the Field of English & Literary Studies, but with the whole concept of a Bachelor of Arts degree (with Honours). A positive (if somewhat tentative) learning outcome is offered by Selden and Widdowson in their widely used *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (1993). They present literary theory as a kind of tool kit which will enable the individual reader to become theoretically streetwise: "to recognise all literary criticism is a theoretical practice and that to understand the theory - and be able to theorise one's own practice - is to enfranchise oneself in the constituency of cultural politics".<sup>2</sup> This outcome, of course, assumes the existence of an individual sufficiently autonomous to perform these acts successfully - an essentially humanist assumption.

To return to particulars, the WCHE theory unit developed into a series of lecture and seminar sessions stretching over two terms. Each session dealt with a specific theoretical position, or the work of a major theorist: New Criticism, Russian Formalism, Bakhtin, Anglo- American Feminism, Lacan, and so on. The intention was that the sessions should be organised where possible according to a logical or at least chronological progression, although other staff commitments occasionally made this problematic. Thus New Criticism provided a starting point, on the grounds that this was a 'norm' that theoretical developments challenge, Formalism would be followed by Structuralism, Anglo-American feminism by French feminism. The lectures offered exposition of the background, tenets and implications of the particular theory; the seminars usually involved theoretically focussed student discussion of literary or theoretical texts.

By this time, the teaching team had expanded and at different periods included Sarah Davies, Roger Ebbatson, Derek Paget and John Schad. The unit had grown optional extensions: in the last term of their second year, students could attend an series of introductory lectures, broadly based on the pattern of the unit itself; in their final term they were provided with a series of revision sessions. It had also evolved in relationship with other elements of the Combined Studies English courses; third year students would also be taking optional courses in topics

such as West African literature, which were expected to draw on and complement their theoretical studies.

Assessment took the form of two 2,000 word essays, requiring students to evaluate a particular area of theory, or to consider the relationship between two different theories, illustrating their argument by referring to literary texts of their own choice. This course work counted for 40% of the unit mark; the other 60% consisted of a three hour exam paper, consisting in its final manifestation of two questions in the same mode as the essay ones. The forms of assessment (typical of the Combined Studies Course at that time) tended to encourage a conventional approach to learning and teaching, which was reinforced by the comparative success of students in the theory examination.

**We have summarized our assessment of the unit as follows: Positive outcomes:**

- Bright students handled the topic well, seeming able to grasp the complex relationship between their chosen theories, and to explore their uses and limitations with confidence and sophistication. They were prepared to tackle particularly challenging aspects of theory, such as deconstruction or Lacanian psychoanalysis, and were able to draw on these to produce original readings of texts. Several went on to develop their interest in theory in post-graduate study.
- Most students became familiar with the orthodox accounts of the development of literary theory,<sup>3</sup> and could recognize the terminology. As they were in their third year, they could draw on two years of intellectual development and reading experience in seminar discussions.
- As a result, they could apply their theoretical knowledge to other parts of the course, especially in those optional elements where tutors encouraged the process

There were relatively few failures- and in many years the theory exam produced a better average marks than the more conventional text-based elements of the course.

**Negative outcomes:**

- Weak students were able to take a classically 'surface' approach to a difficult subject, memorising everything they thought relevant to what they saw as the easiest option. This led to:
- a heavy dependence on secondary sources - mainly popular introductions to literary theory. At its worst, this took the form of large-scale plagiarism; frequently it appeared as garbled rephrasings of imperfectly understood chunks of secondary material.
- Students showed little familiarity with primary material, finding enough information to complete the assignments in the introductions.
- They showed little sense of the subject as a whole: it was possible to focus on selected areas (probably four at most, as they could answer exam questions on topics they had covered in their essays), and to ignore the rest. Even with the most able it was difficult to assess whether they had a grasp of the inter- connections between all areas of theory.
- Where students did perceive a relationship, it tended to be a negative one, because of the competitive, even antagonistic relationship between areas of theory, as each successive perspective appears to discredit the previous one. Thus Anglo-American feminism (and, indeed, everything else) reveals the limitations of New Criticism, but its own are unearthed by the greater theoretical sophistication of French feminism. As the most recent development, post-structuralism tended, at least in the first generation of theory texts,<sup>4</sup> to be lent a teleological authority, as 'state-of-the-art' theory.

When measured against the first, purely pragmatic, justification for teaching theory, the unit was successful: in terms of performance, students were coping at least adequately; they probably had as much access to the 'tool-kit' as they needed to complete their third year options, and in many cases, the quality of their dissertations was enhanced by the integration of a theoretical framework. In terms of Selden and Widdowson's vision of the theoretically self-reflective practitioner, it is hard to claim much success: the majority of students (with the honourable exception of some Marxists and feminists) continued to be unaware of their own ideological predispositions, and unable to reflect, except in a naively subjective way, on their own practice. This was particularly apparent among the large numbers of students who chose to focus on reader response theories.

The Revised Version was developed primarily as a result of the introduction of a modular scheme based on a two semester year: this posed the initial challenge of delivering a topic originally spread over four ten-week terms in the fifteen weeks of a single semester (and of the fifteen, only eleven are actually allotted for teaching). It was decided to take the opportunity to provide students with their theoretical 'toolkit' at a moment when they could make best use of it: at the beginning of their Year Two studies, they would have a year's experience of studying literature to draw on, and virtually two years of opportunities to use it. We were to become increasingly aware of the tension produced by this module's relationship to the Modular Scheme, which requires all modules to be self-contained, and its generative role in the English Field - its conceptual frameworks need to be implanted in the students' practice in that Field, so that extrapolation to other modules is normal, not estranged. (Though, as Chomsky once remarked, the making strange of intellectual material is a critical first stage in understanding, otherwise the defining characteristics of whatever is being studied will remain unproductive.

Where the original unit tended to privilege text, in the form of the different theoretical manifestos (albeit through secondary versions), the new module is intended to be reader-driven, and by implication, process - and skill-based. To avoid the tendency to perceive literary theory as a series of discrete areas, neatly pigeon-holed under headings like 'Post-structuralism,' we took a radically different approach to the problem. It was decided to organise study round a series of topics, language, Subjectivity, Form, History, and Gender, each of which is dealt with over two weeks, the object is to encourage students to perceive 'theory' as an entity in which different positions can be understood as differences in attitude to, and emphasis on, these central issues. To reinforce this experience and to encourage students to work with primary, rather than secondary material, we have made our set text the very comprehensive reader, edited by Selden, *The Theory of Reading* (Longman, 1988). As a concession to the difficulty of the subject, we also suggest students use Selden's *Practising Theory and Reading Literature* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989).

The module is allotted three hours of contact time per week, the sessions usually being separately time-tabled. For the first two hours, the whole group (usually about 130-150 students) is taught together: the first is in workshop form, the tutor leading students through a series of exercises designed to alert them to the key questions raised by the topic; the second hour consists of a lecture setting out the main theoretical positions in relation to the topic. For the last hour, students separate into seminar groups of about thirty to perform practical exercises in applying theory to literary texts.

This process is based on a carefully constructed and continually evolving workbook, in which the contents of every session, including lectures, is provided in detailed and accessible form. This is designed to enable students to engage with the topic, and to participate in all sessions, rather than attempting to cope with difficult material by wholesale note-taking.

Assessment originally consisted of a single paper (completed under coursework conditions), consisting of three sections, designed to allow even weak students to demonstrate their grasp of the subject, but also allowing stronger ones to work at an appropriate level of sophistication. In response to the concern of both students and external examiners about the pressure produced by a single assessment opportunity, we have included an extra section, to be completed by week three of the module. This appears below as Section 1.

- Section 1 consists of a 'compare-and-contrast' exercise based on two passages of criticism relating to a novel studied on one of the Year One mandatory modules. (1,000 words)
- Section 2 requires them to summarise an important controversy in four out of the five topics studied. (250 words per topic)
- Section 3 is a more complex and focused version of 1. Students are given three passages of criticism, and asked to compare the approaches of each to issues like the role of the author, or the relationship between literature and history. (1,000 words)
- Section 4. Students explore the relevance of three theoretical concepts (for example, ideology or the unconscious) to a literary text of their choice. (1,000 words)

#### **Positive outcomes:**

- All but the weakest students demonstrate a real engagement with the topic, including some sophisticated displays of close reading in Sections 1 and 3. This is also indicated by the level of discussion in all taught sessions.
- The external examiner commented on the exceptionally high standard of the best work, and a majority of students performed better in terms of grades on this module, despite the unfamiliar material and means of assessment.
- The Workbook is much appreciated by students on the grounds that it enables them to participate more confidently in all sessions, and to cope better with unavoidable absence.
- Plagiarism is less frequent - being only possible in Section 4.
- Third year students have commented that they are able to develop and utilize the work done in this module in subsequent ones.

#### **Negative outcomes:**

- Students have found the unfamiliar material, structure, and assessment method of the module cause considerable anxiety; it has become something of a by-word for difficulty.
- There did appear to be a high failure rate for the first two cohorts taking the module, but this appears to reflect a higher failure rate within the Field. The consensus among the teaching team is that the commonest underlying cause of failure is illiteracy, rather than incomprehension.

It is possible that other tutors are finding difficulty in developing connections between Theoretical Perspectives and their own modules because they are not familiar with its approach. They may expect students to be familiar with, for example, detailed aspects of reception theory which are not dealt with in the module. (Here it is important to bear in mind the huge difference in the amount of time available for teaching theory in the UMS.) There are honourable exceptions, of course.

It is not clear yet whether we can claim more than internal success with this module, despite the testimony of strong students. The ability to theorise their own practice is still rare among students. There is anecdotal evidence that some students are still adopting a strategic and largely superficial approach, getting through a difficult topic as best they can, then putting the

whole painful experience behind them.<sup>5</sup> It seems fair to ascribe some of the blame for this to the nature of modular degrees, which foster such an approach, however we shall continue to address the problem of developing the generative aspect of the module. We have already made changes to strengthen its links with the Field's two Year One mandatory modules. The involvement of more English tutors in developing and teaching the modules will certainly assist this process.

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What our students are likely to learn from such a doctrinal revolution is to rubbish values they have never been familiar with - a somewhat arid lesson. More alarmingly, they may learn to devalue skills they have not acquired. The freedom of interpretation advocated by Barthes is not likely to foster the academic development of a student struggling to come to grips with the use of irony in *Sense and Sensibility*. This is why I have reservations about the introduction of theory in the first year - it seems more productive to provide the grounding in close reading and literary discourse that is theory's occulted 'other'.

Theoretical Perspectives also reduces the conflict between the theory and practice of theory teaching. For my personal learning outcome has been to acknowledge the essential (if sceptical) humanism of my own approach. I must acknowledge the inconsistency of my position as teacher, which is one of constitutional authority. In the very act of lecturing and leading seminar discussion, and especially in the act of assessing and classifying students' work, I am obliged to ignore the radicalism of much of what I am teaching. I cannot afford to dispense with the assumption that meaning can be fixed enough in writing for students' assignments to be marked, that the marks mean something, and that I am in a position to judge what those marks should be. And while I am a feminist who uses the insights of Marxism in my own textual practice, I do not accept that it is adequate for me to declare those interests, and then teach and assess on the basis that my views represent 'correctness.' I am clearly appealing to some objective, not politically inflected, notion of 'value' in the process of learning and teaching.

No less importantly, I think students need to believe that I, at least, understand what they are trying to learn. With no doubt predictable irony, I teach in the most conventional manner when I am holding a seminar on deconstruction: to avoid a panic response (intellectual, even physical, scattering by the group), I find myself resorting to a kind of Outward Bound Course style of leadership in the effort to conduct students safely across the Grimpen Mire of the text, celebrating its quaking surface and unplumbable depths, while they are all too aware of the slavering hound of assessment breathing down their necks. I attempt to make sense of deconstruction, to conceptualise it in terms that I think students can grasp - activities that are perfectly consistent with the aims and objectives of the Field, but ludicrously inconsistent with Derridean subversions of the claims of logical analysis and conceptual thought.

D.S.

1 The module is compulsory for all students taking English as a Single, Major or Joint element in their degree.

2 R. Selden & P. Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p.8. .

3 As provided in the most widely used introductions to the topic, for example, Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980); Terry Eagleton, *An Introduction to Literary Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983); Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

4 Selden and Widdowson, pp.6-7.

5 I have asked students on other Year Two modules questions about Material studied in Theoretical Perspectives, only to encounter blank stares. 0.5.

6 Selden and Widdowson remark of 'Practical Criticism' that 'we may yet come to regret its obloquy', p.13.

