Discussion/Bespreking

Teaching a Theory-based English Syllabus

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This report describes the motives for introducing theory-based syllabi in the Department of English at the University of Durban-Westville some years ago, the nature of the syllabi themselves, and the nature of staff and student reaction to them. The conclusions reached are that the new syllabi are an improvement on the old, that they are a qualified success, and that they present a number of not insuperable difficulties, which difficulties are described at some length. Finally, a way forward is suggested. It is hoped that this report will be useful to other departments engaged in similar projects.

At the beginning of 1987 the English Department at the University of Durban-Westville, with the approval of Senate, did an unusual thing. It switched from teaching a conventional English literature syllabus to teaching a syllabus based throughout on the theory of literature. Now, three-and-a-half years later, would seem a good time to make a first assessment of the success or failure of this project. In order to do so, though, it is necessary to recall what we expected of the new syllabus, which entails trying to remember our motives for making the change.

Our existing syllabi were like those offered at other local universities and which are still being offered at some. The original model had in fact been the UNISA syllabi of the early sixties. Like some other English departments we offered a Practical English course innocent of academic content. The courses English I, II and III consisted largely of a study of canonical metropolitan literature, and read like a survey of Leavis's Great Tradition. Some of the staff were reading theory, but I think it fair to say in retrospect that the upshot of the teaching nevertheless remained the inculcation of British values in a South African student clientele. About a sixth of a student's time over three years was spent on African and Indian literature, but our efforts in that direction seem to me now to have been directed subliminally at self-validation. There was no reference in the syllabi to the theory of literature.

If most of our students were content with the then syllabi, their contentment was based on an uninformed acceptance of notions of the field of study inculcated in them during their school years, reinforced by the imposition upon them of the larger neo-colonial system that determined their nature as students. The superficiality and irrelevance of our work would be brought home to us sometimes by the naive inappropriateness of student responses in written exercises, or by questions such as "What is an Ode?", "What is a Grecian?" and "What is an urn?" Besides our sense of the frivolity of much of what we were doing, there was our sense that the field of study had changed and we had not, and our fears that our students did not read except to satisfy the demands of our syllabi. They could conceivably go through the

rest of their lives believing that the literary works we prescribed for study constituted all that mattered of English literature.

We were not satisfied. It seemed self-evident that our students, like us, were South African, that they had a right to a trenchant and relevant education and we to give it to them, and that we should have to rethink our syllabi.

We began to do so by agreeing that a syllabus statement should actually say something. If a "syllabus" consists only of a list of English literary texts to be read, it suggests that values and meanings exist "out there" to be unproblematically discovered, and that those values have to do with the British tradition. We were in the process of articulating for ourselves what we wanted to teach students, and it seemed proper to tell students in a set of syllabus statements what the course content would be, rather than permitting it to remain a hidden agenda.

Our most important decision, perhaps, reached over many months of workshopping the syllabi, was that the most central course content would be the theory of literature, which would be foregrounded in all years of study, even the first. A concomitant of this decision was that English literary texts would be prescribed not as the syllabus itself but as supportive and illustrative material for the teaching of theory.

Our motives for taking this decision seemed clear. They had to do with our perception that theoretical paradigms, even when unconsciously subscribed to or unarticulated, underpin all teaching of literature in any event. Further, we perceived a ready relationship between ideology and theoretical paradigms. We could teach a postmodern novel, for instance, in such a way as to illustrate poststructuralism, which we saw as relating directly to the latest twists and curlicues in liberal-humanist ideology. The teaching of theory could therefore be made to illuminate students' lives as well as literary texts, and such a programme would have far greater relevance to the South African scene than whatever we had been doing previously.

Also, we believed that theory was culture-bound to a much lesser extent than many poems, plays and novels. All of our students, but our black students in particular, were seriously hampered in their attempts to read by lack of culture-specific knowledge. We thought our students would find it easier to discriminate between sets of relatively abstract ideas (such as structuralism and poststructuralism, or the Frankfurt school and the Prague school) than to decode texts bound to an alien culture. Abstract ideas often confound students, especially first-years. But our black students were unusually intelligent, representing the tip of a very blunt educational pyramid. They should therefore be able to manipulate concepts of some complexity, which ability, if developed, would more than compensate for their lack of the culture-specific knowledge demanded of students in more conventional English syllabi. We therefore hoped that our overall pass-rate would improve, despite the fact that our courses would have greater academic rigour than those they were superseding.

Further, we thought it more useful to supply our students with a knowledge of models of reading and techniques for putting them into effect than with exemplary interpretations of a limited number of texts. Interpretations are in

themselves not transferable from one text to another, and the methods by which they are arrived at are often an inimitable mystery to students; whereas models of reading are generally applicable and could be especially valuable to students who would have to do most of their reading after they had graduated.

So we devised new syllabi, as follows:

The courses English I, II and III were to be seen as cumulative and composite, and we resolved to encourage only aspirant English majors to register for them. This gave us the ability to plan for three unbroken years of study, rather than having to attempt to reach some sort of conclusion at the end of each year. Students wishing to take English as a service course were to be encouraged to register for a substantially different course, English IT (for "terminal"), in which the department would attempt to reach a conclusion at the end of the year.

English I was to consist of general literary theory and of generic theory – the theory of poetry, of drama, and of fiction (the novel, the short story, and popular fiction) – illustrated by analysis from an array of theoretical perspectives of a variety of literary texts. The schools of thought to be introduced (in no great depth) would be limited at this level to three or four of the currently more influential. The literary texts to be used as illustrative material would be selected not particularly for their literary value (whatever the phrase may be thought to mean) nor for their possession of a place in a revered canon, but on the grounds that they lent themselves to exemplifying the way in which texts are differently constituted through the use of different models of reading. The selection of texts was further qualified by the requirements that none of them should rely too heavily on knowledge of an alien culture, and that South African texts should be well represented.

The teaching of theory was to continue in English II and III, where we would deal with the ramifications of the field in greater detail. It was less obvious what principles were to guide us in the selection of supportive literary texts at these levels. Certainly we wished our courses to represent our own literature fairly well, and to support such a study we should also have to look at writing in English, north of the Limpopo. Also, many of our students still have an affinity for India, and are equally excited by Indian writing from the Caribbean, which interests we could conveniently accommodate.

Some of us thought we should continue to survey metropolitan literature, partly in order to keep in touch with other English departments. Others had special interests to foster, and we found ourselves with more material in hand than any one student could be expected to cover.

We therefore divided the second- and third-year courses into elective modules from which students could choose on the basis of their interests, with the proviso that every student's selection was to be academically coherent. Some of the modules may change from year to year, but most remain stable. Those offered in 1990 were:

Middle English literature
Shakespeare

Elizabethan and Jacobean literature excluding Shakespeare
Seventeenth-century writing
Eighteenth-century writing
Romantic writing
Victorian writing
Twentieth-century British poetry
Twentieth-century U.S. poetry
Twentieth-century British fiction
Twentieth-century U.S. fiction
Modern drama
South African writing
African writing north of the Limpopo
Indian and Caribbean writing
Standard literature in translation
Satire
Narratology
Feminist writing
Film

The terminal first-year course, English IT, was modelled on similar principles, for similar reasons: we should teach theory, and make our supportive material thoroughly relevant to students' daily lives. Material, both theoretical and supportive, was to be of the sort that could comfortably be covered in a single year.

We resolved that the main thrust of the course would be to demonstrate the extent to which the "realities" of students' everyday lives are determined by discourse, and to do so by analysing, chiefly from a materialist perspective, the relationships between ideology, writing and speech. Discourse was arbitrarily divided into six modes for convenience of study: canonical literature, documentary literature, journalism, polemical literature, popular literature, and oral literature, which segments of the course were to be supported by a "language" component consisting chiefly of semantics. We wished students to see through language to the purposes which give rise to it, and to be able to interpret the discourse they encounter daily, in a liberatory way. It was therefore necessary for us to devise a text-book of our own, which briefly describes the theoretical parameters of the course and contains many examples of South African discourse, often of an ephemeral nature. The exercises entailed by the syllabus include field-work such as a journalism project which demands that students find, read and relate newspaper reports written from a variety of ideological perspectives.

The English IT course has now been up and running for four years, and we produced our first graduates from the new English I, II and III programme at the end of last year, so we are in a position to report on the efficacy of both programmes.

The general pass-rate has not changed significantly since the introduction of the new syllabi. That in itself does not mean much more than that the courses are not of a crippling difficulty. Speaking very generally, a bright, motivated

student at any university passes a course regardless of its content, and a lazy student fails. One needs to look elsewhere to judge student response – perhaps to the nature of students' written work. When we do so, we firmly conclude that the new syllabi are a qualified success with most students, who like them and respond to them positively. I ask that this be borne in mind while I describe the shortcomings of the programme.

The English IT course excites chiefly those students with a strong political bent, most of whom are black. Students in Commerce, Education and Law respond to the relevance of the course to their everyday academic and professional lives. It disrupts their preconceptions productively and leads to a fresh critical awareness. Often the experience is uncomfortable, leading to conflict between new notions and previously comfortable clichés. Some react to this discomfort by attending to the course content selectively, and for the weaker students, inevitably, values and meanings remain unproblematic and the world is still starkly etched in black and white.

This lack of comprehension by some may partly be a concomitant of the way in which the course has been structured. Although we state that the generically-based division of material is a matter of convenience (as well as a way of acknowledging that generic considerations have an impact on the meanings generated by discourse) and that the course as a whole tells a single story, as it were, students tend not to draw relations between work performed in different segments of the course (by different members of staff, whose views may differ to an extent) and tend to have difficulty in making sense of the course as a whole. The course content panders to the intellectually lazy student, regardless of the thrust of the teaching. The theoretical paradigm must be taught, and becomes for some a set of "facts" to be memorised and regurgitated at the drop of a hat. The same applies to our descriptions of the conditions of production and reception of material for analysis. We are forced into such descriptions by students' lack of background knowledge and lack of reading experience. They do not read popular fiction or newspapers, they do not know how and why news is produced, and the oral tradition is opaque to almost all of them, including our black students. Some of the categories into which course material is divided are therefore empty of living content for particular students. For them, the discourses that would seem most immediate would be those of the home, the lecture theatre, the student cafeteria, the bus queue and the bedroom, and it is precisely these modes of discourse which are absent from the course material at the moment, as we have found it difficult, so far, to reflect such discourse usefully in print. The class is always very large, averaging 1 000 students from year to year, which makes it difficult to match didactic methods and course contents with the needs and abilities of some significant groups in the class. Some students are relatively sophisticated, and find our attempts at simplification of material to be boring, while others have so few relevant skills and so little relevant knowledge that our attempts at simplification miss the mark altogether with them. These are uncomfortably broad generalisations to make about people, and we freely admit that we do not know enough about our students as individuals to be able to assess their needs validly. Our attempts to elicit such information from

the class through the administration of questionnaires have supplied us with only superficial information of no great use to us. The exercise of attempting to teach theory in everyday language is, in any event, highly problematic, and a source of considerable difficulty for the staff. And the adverse didactic situation arising from our large student numbers compels us to use an array of staff to teach the course, some of whom, while being sympathetic to the chief thrust of the syllabus, may be so set in more usual ways of thinking and teaching that their work may actually blur the outlines of the course. We conclude that our new English IT syllabus is a success, but requires improvement.

The English I, II and III courses are also a qualified success, in our estimation, and require improvement. Too many students demonstrate in their work a desire to avoid the chief thrust of the syllabi rather than to grapple with it, or receive the courses passively rather than actively engaging with them. For some of these students the course content seems to be something like an artificial barrier between themselves and a success to be achieved in other contexts after they have graduated. This strange alienation may be exacerbated by the fact that at the University of Durban-Westville only the departments of English and Afrikaans teach theory; the many other language departments here teach as they would have, forty years ago. The effect is to institutionalise theory as a form of abstract gymnastics demanded of those with aspirations in the establishment.

These students' sense of artificiality is reinforced by the strangeness to them of the language of theory. As in the course English IT, staff sometimes find it difficult to simplify the language of theory for students' benefit without oversimplifying the theories themselves. One needs to communicate in lectures, which entails careful control of pitch; but to separate theories from the relatively opaque jargons in which they are couched is to falsify, partially at least, the worlds in which they are frames of reference, or even to transpose them into naive worlds where the theories are clearly inapplicable. You will remember that one of the reasons why we decided to base our teaching on theory was that it was less culture-bound than commonly prescribed literary texts; but it exists in an historical continuum, and does not float free of cultural bric-a-brac altogether. One cannot read Foucault or Lacan unless one is well grounded in the prevailing Eurocentric notion of the subject, which notion is inoperative in rural Africa and would be anathema to a Buddhist, for instance. And Derrida's critique of ratiocinative processes must necessarily be opaque to one whose thought-processes have not largely been determined by the Enlightenment. The contexts of theory, then, play a role in alienating a minority of Indian or black students, like the language, and the accident of theory's institutionalisation in the Afrikaans and English departments. These students therefore respond to the courses with what could be construed as matching hypocrisy. In selecting modules for study, for instance, they are inclined to choose what they perceive as easy options rather than what is relevant and academically exciting; and their choices may occasionally be based on the relative popularity of the members of staff offering the module, which popularity derives fairly directly from the award of high marks to

student work. This was not the result we were aiming at when we revised the syllabi.

It is possible that the attitudes and teaching practices of a small minority of members of staff, who may not be aware that they are not fully equipped to teach the new syllabi, reinforce such student behaviour. Students get sufficient theory over the three years of study to ensure that even the weakest among them finish the programme with at least a superficial knowledge of many schools of thought. But many of them are unable to do anything with this knowledge. The primary object of detailing the analysis of literary texts in lectures is meant to be the demonstration of literary theory in action, the application of specific theories to the reading of poems, plays and novels; yet many students demonstrate an inability to apply their knowledge of theory that goes beyond the usual human difficulty of relating the abstract to the concrete. This suggests to me that some staff are not foregrounding their theoretical parameters in teaching their modules. If they are teaching in an affective way, this would reinforce students' belief that the theoretical thrust of the syllabi is a sham, and almost prevent students from engaging with theory. My suspicions are supported by my reading of the examination questions set at the end of each year, some of which occasionally look very like the sort of questions we ourselves were required to answer thirty years ago, when we were undergraduates. I believe that what we are dealing with here are old habits of mind and practices which are in unconscious but effective conflict with newly learnt principles. And the nature of specific modules in the second and third years of study lends itself to such thinking and teaching, as it forces staff and students to engage in a series of culturally opaque historical exercises very like those they were engaged in before the introduction of the new syllabi. If this is the price one has to pay for engaging in the project of a survey of metropolitan literature, it may be advisable to relinquish the project. But we can scarcely ignore the rich literature of previous centuries, and to deal with some of it entails contextualising it historically, which in turn demands a consideration of the ontological status of such historical material and, as our students have no useful knowledge of history, an almost infinite historical regression in the glossing of a text, for which we do not have the space in our syllabi.

Our perception that the new English syllabi are working better than the old but not as well as we wished has led us to begin a review of the syllabi and of our didactic practices, which could occupy us for months to come. We have already begun the process of review, and have reached the conclusion that the faults in the new syllabi lie in the details rather than in the general thrust. We have therefore already agreed that theory will continue to be the basis of all courses. In order to entrench theory in day-to-day lecturing practice, we have jointly resolved to require all staff to make frequent references to the general theory components of the courses while teaching their sections of the syllabi, to require all staff to foreground in lectures the paradigms they employ in interpreting writing, and to require all staff to foreground in lectures their methods of arriving at readings. These decisions should militate against the practice of affective interpretation, and integrate the general theory compo-

nents of the courses in all the other components. We shall continue to teach an array of theories in English I, II and III, and continue to limit the theoretical framework in English IT to a single paradigm (for lack of the time to do more), which paradigm is to inform all the segments of the course.

In order to induce the duller students to make the connections they presently do not see in the English IT programme, we intend to re-organise the material on a thematic base, and to treat each theme as it appears in different modes of discourse. We hope to deal with three or four such themes in any one year, and to select themes (such as "gender relations" for instance) on the grounds of student interest chiefly. Such an organisation would cut across what to some students would seem to be the rigid categorisation of writing into modes of discourse, while preserving the notion that meanings are discourse-bound.

We have reluctantly relinquished (the degree of reluctance was not as great as expected) the project of conducting a chronologically progressive survey of metropolitan literature in English I, II and III, without relinquishing the notion of the historicity of writing; and I doubt that we shall cease teaching Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton and company altogether. But now I am beginning to speculate, as this is as far as we have got in our deliberations. I could speculate further on the basis of staff discussions to date, and suggest that student wishes may be more fully reflected than at present in future choices of material – but this remains to be decided.

Obviously we have yet to address some of the more difficult issues raised by our survey of the effectiveness of our teaching of our new syllabi, the most striking of which may be students' difficulties with the language and historical contexts of theories. Any help in this regard, or in regard to any of the other difficulties implicit in teaching a theory-based syllabus, would be very welcome.