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2007

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TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDIG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSG UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dygu 1 | Teaching Cycle 1

Teaching Modern American Literature

Mae’r Cylch Dysgu hwn o’r portffolio TUAAU wedi’i gyflwyno i CADAIR gyda chaniatâd yr awdur uchod. Adnodd i’w ddefnyddio gan ymgeiswyr y TUAAU yn y dyfodol a staff eraill ydyw, fel rhan o’u datblygu proffesiynol ym Mhrifysgol Aberystwyth. Erys yn eiddo i’r awdur a Phrifysgol Aberystwyth. Os hoffech dyfynnu’r gwaith hwn neu gyfeirio ato, cysylltwch â’r awdur. Ceir y manylion cyswllt yn http://www.aber.ac.uk/cy/directory/.

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Cycle 1: Teaching Modern American Literature

Context
This cycle is based on one of two seminars I taught on a first-year, 20-credit option module *American Literature II: New Immigration to Multicultural Nation* (EN11120), with 10 students, in Semester 2, 2006-7. The module consists of 1 lecture and 1½ hour seminar per week, on a range of topics and authors from twentieth century American Literature; all of the students registered on it have already taken the module *American Literature I: from the Colonies to the ‘Gilded Age’* (EN11020) in Semester 1. Both of the American Literature options are very popular with students, and so resemble Core modules in structure and assessment (2 essays and an exam). A recent development in EN11120 has been the introduction of team oral presentations, to prepare students for the oral assessment which will form part of their overall degree assessment in Part 2 (from next year).

Problems
1) Since these are first-year students, the relative novelty of the university environment to them has to be taken into account: the participatory
nature of learning and teaching, and the potential development of each
student as an independent researcher and debater, are to be
emphasized and encouraged, not taken for granted.

2) In addition, due to the introduction of oral presentations, the students
have to learn teamwork and organizational skills which may well be
unfamiliar to them. Another set of potential problems derive from the
module content: with twentieth century American literature, the
students are faced with a range of cultural and political issues and
questions which may well seem quite foreign, and even disturbing.

3) Lastly, the module has a fairly demanding workload of reading and
seminar preparation, coupled with the extra tasks involved in
preparing oral presentations.

Teaching Plan
The Learning Outcomes are appropriate to a first year module, so that they
comprise developing basic skills in analyzing texts and using criticism, and
participating effectively in oral discussion; an additional Learning Outcome is
the ability to reflect on the literary canon and its politics, on what constitutes
‘literature’ and why.

- My plan was to use the first two seminars, on Willa Cather’s O
  Pioneers! and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, to establish an open
  and inclusive space of discussion, based primarily on student
  responses to those powerful works. I will also use the opening
  seminars to situate and clarify key aspects of early twentieth century
  American literature by connecting them back to elements of Module
  EN11020 (American Literature I) and by providing the students with
  information and reading lists on hand-outs.

- The central learning resource will be the module page on Blackboard,
  where I have written preparation instructions for each seminar and
where students can find a variety of reading lists and links to useful websites.

- From Week 3, the seminars will begin with a 20-minute presentation by a team of students on topics like The Harlem Renaissance, the Great Depression and Postmodern Fictions. I will instruct the students (in teams of 2 or 3) to meet during the week to discuss the presentation and divide up research tasks (to be carried out in the library or online); and to produce one or more hand-outs to distribute at the seminar. I will ask each student not giving the presentation to prepare one question during it about something which interests or perplexes him or her; this should generate some debate between them, without my having to intervene. At the end of the seminar I will respond to the student presentation, noting its strengths and weaknesses, and looking ahead to how oral assessment will work in their degree structure next year.

Evidence
The module is to be reflectively observed and evaluated on the basis of a range of sources: the quality of student essays, the level and inclusiveness of discussion in the seminars, the quality of student oral presentations, student evaluation forms, and also peer observation (see below Teaching Observation Sheets 1b, 1c and 1f).

Progress Notes
A very good learning-and-teaching atmosphere developed in the early seminars, with students willingly discussing and showing their enjoyment of the module’s first two texts, the novels by Cather and Fitzgerald (see below Teaching Observation Sheets 1b and 1c). There was the inevitable risk of the articulate and responsive students ‘crowding out’ the less confident, as Professor Watt noted in her observation. This was partly solved by the oral presentations (from Week 3), in which all of the students had to speak; and I
dealt with it myself in every seminar by attempting, with occasional success, to include those more reluctant to speak in the discussion.

In some of the topics we covered – particularly those of the Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights – there was difficult political material which some students found disturbing. I found a volume of essays entitled *Teaching African American Literature* (eds. Graham, Burke & Davis, 1998) extremely useful in reflecting on some of the issues that arose here, concerning the ethnic (and sometimes racist) identity of literature and its critical history. I was able to present some of the arguments there to the students – and also recall relevant aspects of pre-twentieth-century American literature, which they studied in Semester 1, such as the texts by Douglass and Jacobs; this allowed us to begin a discussion of the politics of the literary canon (one of the module’s Learning Outcomes).

**Feedback**

- Peer observations of this seminar have been, on the whole, very positive. The seminar observed by Dr Slocombe was poorly attended, and I had to alter my normal teaching methods to deal with only 2 students (both of whom gave a presentation), as I indicate in my response to Dr Slocombe’s Observation Sheet (1f). Encouraging aspects noted in these Peer Observations were the high level of interactive and intelligent discussion in the seminar, good preparation by tutor and students, the effective use of learner support (Blackboard, hand-outs).

- Student Evaluation Forms are likewise very positive (although attendance problems at the end of term meant that few forms were returned). One student notes that doing an oral presentation offered a useful chance to develop research skills; and all are pleased with the learning experience of the seminars (see below, Appendix: Student Evaluation Forms).
Assessment: Plan and Implementation (to be added after ‘Evidence’, p.12)

The learning outcomes for this module are the development of basic reading and writing skills – including the correct use of language, the ability to comment effectively on a literary text, the ability to develop a clear argument and that of presenting a well-organised essay. Further learning outcomes are the ability to participate constructively in group discussion, and to work effectively as a member of a team in giving an oral presentation.

The assessment tasks given to the students were two 2,500-word coursework essays (60%), plus two essays in an examination (40%). In addition, I gave less formal assessment of oral presentations by student teams in the seminars.

In assessing student essays, I produced a comment sheet with sections on language, observation, structure and analysis (see Figure 1). These sections correspond closely to the module learning outcomes, and I was able to use them to provide formative feedback to the students on their various strengths and weaknesses. I also repeatedly encouraged the students to make use of my office hours to see me for feedback and discussion of these comment sheets, regarding how they related to both the marking criteria and the learning outcomes (and three students did in fact come for such a discussion). At the beginning of the next academic year I will be sending the students an e-mail to inform them that I will be available if they wish to have summative feedback on their examination performance or to discuss the module in general.
At a less formal level, I provided assessment of team presentations by students. I was often able, in my comments during the last 15 minutes of a seminar, to take my lead from questions or responses given by some of the non-presenting students, which added to a general positive ‘feedback loop’. I would begin by praising what the students had done well – and they often produced well-designed hand-outs and communicated fairly effectively – before pointing out what required more work, or what should simply be done differently. I reminded them that oral assessment would feature in Part II of their degree, and also that in the future potential employers would be very interested in how well they performed in this kind of exercise, involving teamwork, organization and clear presentation.

As I state below, the student feedback on this module was largely very positive. The assessment of their essays seemed to be effective, in that students appreciated having their learning tasks clarified by the four sections on the comment sheet.

It was notable however that the performance of students in the exam was in general not as strong as in their coursework, and I will certainly be raising this as an issue for discussion at the Departmental board meeting. If we are to retain the examination as a component of this module, my feeling is that we should be giving the students some active instruction in and preparation for writing essays under exam conditions.
**Figure 1**

Department of English/Adran Saesneg

**Comment Sheet**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Reference No.</th>
<th>061210888</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Module No. and Short Title</td>
<td>EN11120 American Literature 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar Tutor</td>
<td>Dr Luke Thurston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>April 2007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Language**

This essay is written with verve, though some sentences are overlong. There is good use of quotations and critical references.

**Observation**

The essay responds vigorously to the question, making a number of effective points on Fitzgerald's novel. However, the passage on historical context (p.5) wanders away from a consideration of what Fitzgerald actually wrote, and becomes a digression from the argument.

**Structure**

There is a clear structure to the argument, though the conclusion is somewhat wooden.

**Analysis**

This is a good engagement with *The Great Gatsby*, though the repeated focus on a personal response to the novel rather limits the scope of the analysis.
• The student essays vary considerably, of course. On the whole, however, they show an encouraging shift towards analytic – as opposed to merely descriptive – writing; and there are some excellent passages which show the development of real critical research skills. It is notable that a fairly large number of the students choose to answer questions on the more challenging topics (like the Harlem Renaissance or the Great Depression).

Implications
• My experience of teaching this module convinces me that the introduction of oral presentations to the seminars has greatly improved the learning-and-teaching environment. It was striking to observe, however, that some students who could be very eloquent in open discussion found the more formal framework of the presentation a constraint, reducing their intellectual self-confidence. There is more work to be done in preparing students to see this exercise as an opportunity, not a trial.
• Teaching this module has shown me that the unfamiliarity and difficulty of learning tasks can be quite successfully addressed if they are counterbalanced by proper systems of communication, feedback and learner support.