

***For enhancing positive student engagement in university literary studies through student-centred learning curricula incorporating advanced methodologies in humanities and authentic assessment.***

**Overview**

In this application I refer to several subjects which I have re-developed significantly over the last half-decade: *Australian Literature*; *The Avant-Garde in the Twentieth Century*; and *Self, Science and Society in Eighteenth-Century Literature*. In these subjects my aim is to encourage positive engagement and student-centred learning in relation to local and international social, historical and cultural issues, as reflected in literature and associated arts. Students in provincial areas of Australia often do not have the exposure to the arts and intellectual life which characterize major metropolitan areas. Yet artistic and creative discourses are unparalleled sources of knowledge about the individual, humanity, society, history and culture. In order to expand students' knowledge and understanding of these areas I use the following strategies:

- development of curricula and resources that reflect a command of the field through implementing advanced methodologies in humanities studies and employing multimedia resources for local and global contextualization of issues and ideas;
- approaches to assessment and feedback that foster independent learning, particularly authentic assessment and positive student engagement in class activities.

**Criterion 2: Development of curricula, resources and services that reflect a command of the field**

In their third year, students of English take a subject on Critical Theory. This is a challenging subject which involves close study of abstract and theoretical writing on the nature of texts, culture, representation and reality, and critical methodologies in the study of literature, narrative and culture. When I first began to teach this subject students often expressed the wish that the literary study they had previously done might have incorporated some of these contemporary research approaches; it probably did—but they couldn't see it, because teachers often teach intuitively according to pedagogies which have become unconscious. I resolved then to re-structure all my teaching in a way which introduced students to critical, analytical and research methodologies which I tended to use in my own research and which would be useful to them both in undergraduate study and later, in research oriented work. Some contemporary theorized approaches proved to be applicable to the subjects I was teaching, in particular Cultural Studies, New Historicism, and Reader Response theory. In *Australian Literature*, I discontinued the traditional structure of a sequence of texts chosen for their canonical prestige, and supposed to represent the 'best' Australian poetry, prose and drama. I re-structured the subject into a sequence of cultural investigations: 'In the Penal Colony', 'Settlers and Settlement', 'National Identity', 'The Land Itself', 'Mothers and Motherhood', 'Fathers and Fatherhood', 'The Life of Art', 'War and Political Conflict', 'Indigenous Lives and Culture', and others. Within each theme I selected texts (and paintings, songs and movie extracts where applicable) and arranged them in a chronological order so that students might attain not only an understanding of what, for example, World War I was like for Australians from non-fiction, fiction and poetry of the period, but also how that event continues to be mythologized, historicised, and incorporated into discursive formations like literature and movies (such as Roger McDonald's novel *1915* or Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli*). I was able to draw on my research command in the field of Australian literature here as I have just completed a chapter on the Australian Short Story for the forthcoming *Cambridge History of Australian Literature* and I was able to use especially appropriate material from this in my teaching. This approach also implemented the research vision of James Cook University's Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences, "People, Identity and Place : Intellectual, social, cultural and economic dynamics", which "concentrates on the interconnectedness between people, place and identity... a relationship which today has been radically affected by processes of globalization".

Because of the broad cultural and socio/historical foci of my subjects, I am also able to use various media to stimulate students' interest and engagement. For example, when dealing with 'National Identity' in *Australian Literature*, I ask students to listen to and analyse the lyrics of relevant songs, to compare these to poems and short stories about identity, and further to interrelate these works with iconic representations of Australian Identity in paintings and movie excerpts which we view in the lecture. This multi-media approach helps to create interest and break-up what might otherwise be an hour or two focused purely on pages of text. While demonstrating the use of imaginative resources for student learning, the approach also requires up-to-

date knowledge of the field of study. There is no textbook that covers anything like this, but, drawing on my own expertise in Australian Literature, I was able to compile an appropriate anthology of individual poems, short stories, prose extracts, images, musical pieces and cinema clips, which are either integrated into the lecture transcripts or placed online. In some of the topics, I include a 'focus text' which may be a complete novel, or play, or some longer work. These 'texts' are carefully balanced so as to present a coherent and imaginative resource for student learning. The development of these curricula and resources for learning was also based on my reading about curriculum design in literary study (both the *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* and *Australian Literary Studies* address literary pedagogy from time to time) and educational research on student engagement (see particularly Kerri-Lee Krause (2005) "Understanding and promoting student engagement in university learning communities" [http://www.jcu.edu.au/office/tld/symposia/s2005/h\\_files/info/detail\\_klk.htm](http://www.jcu.edu.au/office/tld/symposia/s2005/h_files/info/detail_klk.htm)).

A variation of cultural studies, New Historicism, is used in *Self, Science and Society in Eighteenth-Century Literature*. Again, instead of a traditional author-based study, students explore how literature (fiction and non-fiction) images 18th-century British history, society and culture. Texts and paintings cluster around such areas as 'Party Politics and Religion', 'Debating Women', 'Slavery and the Slave Trade in England', 'The Plurality of Worlds' (the huge expansion in geographical, natural and scientific knowledge in the period), and 'The Plague Year'. Here I use a Norton anthology edited by Professor Stephen Greenblatt (an authority on the Eighteenth Century, and a leading theorist and practitioner of New Historicism). This textbook is a leader in its field, and bases its content and pedagogical structure on research-led approaches to literary study. I supplement the textbook with multi-media based materials as described above, and I also add another dimension in relating eighteenth-century British issues to modern global ones, so as to reaffirm the significance and relevance of literary study in the contemporary university syllabus. For example, religious and political conflicts of the eighteenth century are compared with contemporary events involving ideological conflict; reactions to the Great Plague and Fire of London are analysed and compared to present epidemics (such as AIDS) and natural disasters; and the eighteenth-century 'debate on woman' is surprisingly relevant to modern feminism. This area is usually considered one of the driest and most difficult of the traditional English literature curriculum, but since employing the approach described above, enrolments in it have risen from 6 or 7 five years ago, to over 40 currently.

Thirdly, in *The Avant-Garde in the Twentieth Century*, I have also combined some 'focus texts' with a multi-media compilation of texts, images, documentaries, music clips, and recorded performances. Students here are introduced to artistic movements such as expressionism, surrealism, DADA, futurism, Vorticism, absurdism, high modernism, 'Fluxus', postmodernism, and many other little-studied but radical avant-garde movements in literature, painting, music, cinema, and multi-media. Students are able to learn how radical movements in England, Europe, and America fed into the great modernist work of Joyce, Beckett, Woolf and others, and are encouraged to explore the artistic, social and cultural issues that resulted in the emergence of such movements. Much of the material was collected by myself on SSP periods overseas. For example, I was fortunate to attend a ground-breaking exhibition of Italian Futurism in Milan and obtain copies and knowledge of works which are simply inaccessible elsewhere. Most of the pieces I provide have had to be painstakingly scanned in and OCRd from rare texts procured personally or via inter-library loan. I also have out-of-print audio-visual material, including rare performances of Beckett. Since collage and poly-artistry (blending several different arts at once) were crucial to most of these movements, the interactive lecture using many different media is perfectly suited to this subject. I believe my expertise in this area has enabled me to create a coherent body of work out of an inspiring and exciting but extremely diverse array of material. When I run into students in subsequent years, it is this course, more than any other, that students comment on as having inspired them, having created an ongoing intellectual curiosity, and as having left a lasting impression on them.

In the subjects referred to above I pay particular attention to the performative aspects of teaching in order to influence, motivate and inspire students to learn. Given the multi-disciplinary and multimedia approach, presentational skill is required to make the material cohere. I use the spoken element of the lecture or tutorial as an interpretive thread which binds together the episodes of reading text, looking at film or other visual material, listening to audio recordings, small group discussion and other interactive activities. I have found that an important element in literary study is the vocalization of the text, which often is intentionally designed to capitalize on the rhythms and sounds of spoken discourse. Repeatedly, students have commented to me 'When I first read the poem, I couldn't understand it—but when you read it in the lecture it suddenly became clear.' Bringing the text to life in this way often functions more effectively in aiding comprehension than critical analysis alone, and this high-level communication, while encouraging student engagement, also

underpins the development of students' critical and analytical skills. Vocalizing the written lecture text is as important as vocalizing the poem. Recently, in adapting my subjects for external delivery, I have tried to preserve the 'presence' of the lecture by recording it and podcasting it on JCU's online flexible delivery software. Although I have no formal response data on this as yet, when I asked external students which was more valuable, the written lecture text or the podcast of the lecture (complete with classroom noises, questions and activities) all replies insisted that the podcast was the more interesting, and helped to clarify material in the written lecture. The more channels of communication open, the better, it seems; even the internal students have expressed unequivocal approval of the podcast.

### **Contribution to student learning**

Over the last three years the *Australian Literature* subject has attracted increasing student enrolments; the attrition rate, an identified concern at James Cook University, has shown some improvement; and the most noticeable result has been that in the distribution of grades, numbers are pushing to the higher edges of grades, with students often gaining University prizes for their work in this subject. In a James Cook University instrument 'Student Feedback on Subjects', recent ratings have been high: for *the quality of the learning experience* in Australian Literature 90% of students rated the subject Acceptable, score = 3 or More than Acceptable, score = 4 (on a five-point scale 4 is an exceptional score, with the university average hovering around 3.2). For *the interest level generated by the subject*, 64% of students rated it More than Acceptable (4). For *organization and structure of this subject* 64% of students again rated More than Acceptable (4). Comment included: *The content matter was contemporary and fun; A nice tempo and pace to the overall structure of the subject; Everyone in the classroom encouraged in participation and made to feel welcome and relaxed; Liked the use of audiovisual material; Best aspects of the subject included: the lecturer's interest and knowledge in the subject was amazing; the variety of books and the flexibility with assignments; I loved the topics covered, quite relevant; that we were able to choose texts for the assignments that best suited us and that there was a broad range of topics to choose from for each assignment task.* This subject has also been enthusiastically received by international students. In 2007 it was offered as a three week intensive to visiting students from the University of Florida, and the students and their Dean of Studies were so impressed they have asked me to repeat the offering for a new group of students who will visit JCU in June this year.

In JCU's 'Student Feedback on Subjects', results for the subject *Self, Science and Society in Eighteenth-Century Literature* included scores of 4.1 for *the quality of the learning experiences* and *interest level generated by this subject*. In the most recent survey 43% of students rated these two parameters as Outstanding (5). Results of 4.3 were also recorded for assessment and feedback on assessment. Comments included: *It's a pity the categories don't go beyond outstanding; This is what I came to uni hoping to learn; Absolutely wonderful; A fabulous choice of writers and reading material; Great to do assignments that were different; excellent subject conducted by an inspiring erudite teacher; the lecturer was very pleasant and polite. He made the subject interesting and he had a very good sense of humour and a quiet disposition.*

Feedback from teaching colleagues has also been encouraging, as evidenced in the attached references. Staff at our sister campus in Townsville who have heard about my teaching from students have sought suggestions on implementing multi-media contextualization and authentic assessment in their own subjects, including a first year subject (EL1200 *Literature in Action*) which I then co-taught cross-campus. At the Cairns campus lecturers in the School of Education have welcomed the foregrounding of pedagogy in my subjects as especially appropriate and illuminating for Education students. In addition, the Director of the Early Childhood Education program has asked me to develop a subject especially for this course, both internal and online, preserving student-centred learning, interactivity, and authentic assessment. I am currently developing EL2013/3013 *Reading and Writing the Short Story* for this purpose.

### **Criterion 3: Approaches to assessment, feedback and learning support that foster independent learning**

While the literary essay, at its best, is an exacting instrument for the discovery and elaboration of complex ideas, many of the students who study literature subjects at university will never be called on to write such essays in their professional life. In my subjects I have therefore developed not only summative types of assessment (such as examinations), but also formative ones, especially alternative types of 'authentic assessment' (Mueller (2006) "Authentic Assessment Toolbox", <http://jonathan.mueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/>). I have also integrated assessment with student learning and development of life-long skills by

setting tasks that mimic realistic activities whenever possible (see Ramsden (1992), [http://cms.jcu.edu.au/teaching/JCUPRD\\_016721](http://cms.jcu.edu.au/teaching/JCUPRD_016721)). In addition I have also been guided by the many innovative types of assessment discussed in the journal *Pedagogy* specializing in critical approaches to teaching literature, language, composition and culture and published by Duke University Press, for example, Virginia Pompei Jones's "Teaching Elements of Literature through Art: Romanticism, Realism, and Culture", *Pedagogy* 7(2): 264-270 (2007). Because *Self, Science and Society in Eighteenth-Century Literature* is probably the most literary of my subjects, students doing this may well be those who go on to a professional life in letters or publishing. As an alternative to an essay, they can choose one of the following tasks, which simulate real life projects: A Dictionary of Quotations on an Eighteenth-Century Theme, A Glossary of Literary Devices in Eighteenth-Century Literature, An Annotated Edition, or An Introduction to an Anthology. As well as being the sorts of things a person with a BA in literature might well do professionally, they are also good learning exercises, requiring the student to comb through the body of set texts, compiling, arranging and synthesizing material from a number of sources—more challenging than dealing with just one poem or one novel. The learning process is further enhanced when I encourage the students to bring their projects to tutorials and comment on each others' work. Over the years I have asked students who have received High Distinctions to make me a copy of their work to show to future students. Interestingly, each generation of students who view this former work seek not merely to imitate it, but want to improve on it, adding their own original element. These samples of work attract much interest when they are exhibited at university Open Day.

Variety and diversity of assessment is important in sustaining enthusiasm, so in *Australian Literature* students are offered a **different** set of authentic tasks, such as to imagine they are writing a 'review' for a newspaper, or a scholarly journal; constructing a web-site with the aim of raising cultural awareness about a topic; compiling a poster-presentation for a conference or symposium; or, for the more creative students a recitation with commentary or a performance (live or recorded), or a creative piece of writing which engages with a set topic. In student feedback surveys, generally more than 50% of respondents have rated the assessment and feedback on assessment for these types of authentic assessments as More than Acceptable (4). This is an achievement of significance in a university where students rate this scale lowest.

Similar projects are appropriate to the *Avant-Garde* subject, which, because of the strong arts-fusion character of much of its work lends itself to multi-media web sites, posters with collage, even sculptural pieces or installations. I encourage students to mimic and replicate the experimentalist emphasis in avant-garde creativity in tutorials and assignments. The emphasis on imaginative, creative activity requires them to exercise their critical and analytical skills, but in a way that has immediate purpose in understanding and experiencing a text in the context of interpersonal communication. Again, students are encouraged to discuss each others' assignment proposals, and share their creative insights. This fosters a very different mood from the usually secretive competitiveness that results when all students in a class are working on an identical narrowly focussed essay topic—by its nature this encourages students to keep their work to themselves. A mini case-study: On one occasion I received a project on Kafka's short story 'Metamorphosis'; the project consisted of a metre-long papier-mâché cockroach covered with illustrations of relevance, myriad reflections of Kafka himself in its compound eyes, and a critical reflection on the story written on the 'wings' of the insect. The project created a sensation not only amongst the students enrolled in the subject but amongst English and Education students (and staff) in general. That student is today putting his BA to good use as a teacher, and writing a novel. He visits the university frequently and his 'assignment' is an exhibit at JCU. All of this illustrates Krause's point that "Engagement is binding of students to each other, to meaningful learning activities, and to the institution" and "Engagement should be an interlocking and a 'fastening' of students to learning and university learning communities in an engagement relationship which is mutually beneficial and continues well beyond graduation."

### Summary

Taken together, the three subjects discussed focus on a key period in the evolution of modernity, from the eighteenth century to the present day, in Australia, Britain, America and Europe. I have developed these three core subjects in the English major as a coherent but varied set of student-centred learning engagements with literature and its contexts, so as to illuminate the intellectual, social, historical and cultural significances of this field of university study. Students learn to apply up-to-date theory and methodology in the humanities, gaining knowledge of an enduring nature about their own worlds and worlds beyond. Through an emphasis on formative assessment students also are guided towards developing critical, analytical and practical skills which will be of use in their professional lives, and in their social and cultural development more broadly.