

The Work of the Course: validity and reliability in assessing English Literature

John Hodgson, University of the West of England

with Bill Greenwell, Open University (retired)

Abstract

This paper reflects on the values and practices of a revolutionary UK A level (senior secondary) course that achieved a high degree of validity and reliability in assessing the study of English literature. John Hodgson and Bill Greenwell were involved in its teaching and assessment from an early stage, and Greenwell's comments on an early draft of the paper have been incorporated. The practice of literary response enshrined in the course was based on a striking application of "personal response" to literature, gave students opportunities to show capability in studying and writing a range of literary styles and genres, provided little motive or opportunity for student malpractice, and engaged teachers regionally and nationally in a developed professional community of practice. It remains a touchstone of quality as well as of innovation in English curriculum and assessment.

Introduction

In 1993, a UK governmental edict drastically reduced the proportion of coursework assessment allowed in most national examinations. It was widely supposed at the time that the primary object in ministers' sights was the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) A level English Literature qualification, syllabus 660. Introduced in 1977 as Syllabus 753 by the Associated Examining Board (AEB), this course embraced a range of pedagogic and assessment practices intended to promote student reading and thinking rather than the rehearsal of received opinion. These included an open-book examination, where candidates could take annotated copies of texts into the examination hall, and an opportunity for students to write a number of "critical" and "creative" assignments that were assessed by the candidates' teachers and moderated by the assessment authority. None of these elements was novel within literature examinations, but the AEB was the first course to offer such a holistic and coherent approach to assessment. Coursework, originally 30%

of the assessment, became 50% in the 1980s, and some teachers and examiners hoped and expected it would reach 100%. (The rise mirrored the increase of GCSE English coursework to 100% in 1986.) However, despite - or possibly because of - a developed system of coursework moderation overseen by the assessment body, the course was regarded as beyond governmental control, and by 2000 (the Curriculum 2000 reform) it had been truncated without consultation and almost beyond recognition.

To reflect at this point in history on the values and practices of a past A level English Literature course may appear a nostalgic indulgence at a time when we need a new vision of literary study to counteract retrogressive curricula and assessment practices. Yet the course stays in the memory of many English teachers, including the authors of this paper, as a touchstone of quality as well as of innovation in English curriculum and assessment. This paper will argue that the course achieved a high degree of both validity and reliability in assessing the study of English literature. This claim depends on two supporting arguments. The first is that the practice of literary response enshrined in the course was based on a novel and striking application of a concept of “personal response” that had its origins in the development of English as an academic subject in the early years of the 20th century. The second is that the design and structure of the course and its assessment arrangements (which involved local moderators employed by the assessment organisation) gave students opportunities to show capability in studying and writing a range of literary styles and genres, provided little motive or opportunity for student malpractice, and engaged teachers regionally and nationally in a developed professional community of practice.

The origins and originality of the course

Syllabus 753 started in 1977, the first examination being held in 1979 (it was a two year course). Its early development coincided with the opening years of Margaret Thatcher’s premiership, when Keith Joseph was education secretary: A level English Literature flourished as a result of the deregulation of the UK assessment market. The course was called “alternative” (the word was even printed on the exam papers), but it wasn’t the first to introduce alternative elements. From 1969, every board except the Northern Ireland Secondary Examinations Council had a clique of schools – mainly in the independent sector – that used alternatives (rarely advertised) to the main syllabus. Typically these syllabuses replaced a given percentage of the terminal exam assessment – from 10% to 33% - with coursework. The rest was in common with the “traditional” syllabus. Syllabus

753, on the other hand, was an integrated alternative to the other AEB offerings. According to Bill Greenwell, whose tertiary college in Exeter was one of the first to adopt the syllabus, this was largely due to Peter Buckroyd, the chief examiner, who had a vision of the whole enterprise. Not only did 753 offer coursework (initially a third of the assessment); it also had two open book papers, one of them also containing practical criticism (the Shakespeare paper). Students were allowed to bring annotated texts in to the examination. These papers initially had a (notional) “reading time” of 15 minutes (invigilators complained at this flexible extension of the conventional three hour examination). To start with, the novel could not be taken in, as there were fears that students would spend the whole examination time reading the novel...

Greenwell's account of Buckroyd's genius is that he grasped that open book exams needed appropriate questions. Rather than offer candidates merely a conventional question (such as a quotation of critical provenance, with the instruction “discuss”), Buckroyd's tasks drew attention to a debatable feature of the work and asked clearly and plainly, with prompts, for appropriate answers. Many questions directed candidates to particular pages of the text, and suggested discourse features that the candidate “might like to consider”. The tasks required candidates to look at detail and to support everything they said by textual reference. The “unseen” too became an invitation to detailed, considered response. On one occasion, Buckroyd gave each student an edited Beckett piece in a large font, with half of page of prompts. In Greenwell's view, students did well in response to the prompts because Buckroyd legitimised their opinions. They were rewarded for what they knew, and for the textually supported feelings they expressed. This was a practical application of personal response, a feature of the study of English Literature that had been central to the subject since its inception.

Personal response

When “English” was established in Cambridge in the early years of the twentieth century as a literary study distinct from philology (Williams 1983), a central concept of the new subject was that it could be studied “practically”, with direct attention to the words on the page. I.A.Richards (1929) called the subject discipline Practical Criticism. What counted, according to F.R.Leavis (1943), was a felt, personal response - “a response is personal or it is nothing” - to the intricate patterning of the text. This textual study was not disconnected from wider social and cultural awareness. The reading process was itself collaborative: Leavis frequently cited Eliot's description of literary

criticism as "the common pursuit of true judgement", and argued that literary studies should "constantly lead outside themselves". Literature students, he claimed, should come to terms with "other fields of special study, other trained approaches, than the literary" (Leavis 1943). The validity of the subject thus derived from the authenticity of the reader's response and from its application not only to literary culture but to social and cultural matters beyond education. Leavis had a strong interest in school education – *Culture and Environment* (1933), a text book for sixth formers (senior secondary students), was written with a schoolteacher colleague, Denys Thompson – and the disciples of Downing College who went forth to teach in both "independent" (fee-paying) and state schools had a considerable influence on English teaching, particularly in the years following the Second World War (Hilliard 2012). However, when translated to school examination syllabuses, the close textual study of imaginative literature came to mean the exhaustive reading of a small number of unrelated works in the light of conventional critical interpretations. "Practical criticism" of "unseen" passages was often included in the course and the assessment, but it is doubtful that much attention was given to such wider cultural factors as author, readership, genre, or period. Thus, when A level courses were introduced in 1951, the idea of "set books", inherited from the Higher School Certificate, became the defining practice of A level English Literature. A small selection from the canon of English Literature was studied in depth, and students were assessed by an end-of-course examination.

By 1966, according to John Dixon, this approach was condemned by delegates from both the UK and the US who attended the international Dartmouth conference in that year. Dixon (1967) argued that the experience of art should be "a thing of our making, an activity in which we are our own interpretive artist". This view that reading literature should itself be an act of personal response and creativity informed succeeding developments.

In the years following Dartmouth, moves gathered pace to reform the English curriculum to promote authenticity and purpose in students' reading, writing and speaking. Work in the London Institute of Education and elsewhere (Gibbons 2013; Medway *et al* 2014) led to the setting up of various curricular projects under the new Schools Council. Pat D'Arcy led a project on *Reading for Meaning* (D'Arcy 1973a,b) that focused on early years and secondary education, while John Dixon's (1979) *English 16-19* project focused on pedagogy at the A level stage. Meanwhile, the Nuffield funded *Arts and the Adolescent* project led to the publication of Robert Witkin's (1974) *The Intelligence of Feeling*, a text that theorised ways of enabling students' responses to art-works, including literature, to be expressed creatively. "Many a university student," claimed Witkin (1974:

68) had “lost the ability to respond to literature in a feeling way in direct proportion to the intense cultivation of his [sic] critical analytical faculties in the sixth form to the exclusion of creative expression.” Witkin’s key concept was the “holding form”, which provided a means by which a reader could transform their feeling-response to a literary work into their own creative production. This work in “transformative” writing, which seeks to overcome the stark dichotomy between “critical” and “creative” activity, was reprised by the UK National Teaching Fellowship *Active Reading Project* (Knights & Thurgar-Dawson 2004).

At A level, these movements led to the development of a number of “alternative” syllabuses, accredited by the examination boards (NATE 2004: 23). Bill Greenwell’s *Alternatives at English A Level* (1988) detailed the variety of approaches being taken. Many schools, determined to contest the atomised study of a few set texts, built their courses around extensive wide reading: one, for instance, listed Larkin’s poetry as a core text, supported by readings of both canonical and modern poets. Many schools and colleges (such as those following the Cambridge Board) adopted thematic approaches. An impressive example given by Greenwell (1988) was Newport (Essex) Free Grammar School’s course on literature about marriage from Chaucer to the present day. Others offered such topics as “Colonialism and Identity”; “History into Literature”; and “New Commonwealth Writing”; or detailed genre or period studies, such as a study of Irish literature from 1900 to 1930 (Daw 1986; NATE 2004). A full discussion, with many examples, of the imaginative teaching that became possible at this time is given in Protherough (1986).

As this paper explains, the most popular and influential “alternative” was the AEB 753 (later 660) English Literature syllabus. This attracted the many English teachers who wanted to engage their students in a textual study that encouraged informed personal response. This remained a core value even after the removal of open-book assessment and reduction of coursework within Curriculum 2000, the governmental reform initiative. As late as 2006, an examiners’ report from the AQA (which succeeded the AEB as the assessment authority) advised students to “make your own way through the texts rather than relying on what critics or the writers of study guides have said” (AQA 2006:84). The syllabus encouraged creative responses to texts, for example in the form of pastiche or parody; and it allowed oral response (discussion, presentation, drama) and for this to be assessed. As explained above, in recognition of the importance of interpretation over memorisation, the examined elements of the syllabus included open-book assessment, where the student was allowed to refer to a text in the examination room. In addition to this “set text” study, candidates were required to write eight coursework essays of approximately 1000 words on books and

tasks chosen in consultation with their teacher. The texts chosen had to cover all literary genres and to include non-fiction, and coursework tasks included opportunities for text transformation and original writing. A further “extended essay” of 3000 words comprised a comparative study of two or more texts linked by author, period, or theme.

Consortium Assessment

By the late 1980s, 50% of the marks were allocated to coursework, which was guided and assessed by area moderators within country-wide consortia of A level teachers. John Hodgson worked for twenty-two years as a local area moderator for this syllabus. The 30+ schools and colleges in his consortium were spread over South Devon and Cornwall, and some colleagues had to undertake considerable journeys to attend the twice-yearly daylong meetings. Every centre sent at least one representative, usually the Head of the English Department, while some sent several teachers. The venue was usually provided free by one of the centres, which also provided lunch. The first meeting of the year, usually early in the spring term, was an in-service training event. This would focus on one or more aspects of the course, such as ways of approaching the chosen set texts, the choice of themes and texts for coursework study, organising and assessing students’ oral presentations, and so on. Colleagues reported that these meetings were enjoyable because they offered opportunities for discussion of literature and ideas as well as of pedagogy and assessment. There was usually discussion of suitable coursework assignments, which were seen as a means of student learning as well as of assessment. Student and teacher were encouraged to negotiate the wording of a question, and the approach to be taken. Collaborative study could involve drafting and discussion with classmates and teacher, rather than an isolated effort to read the teacher’s mind. The student’s coursework folder was intended to be evidence of mastery of a range of texts and genres, including the student’s original writing.

The second meeting of the year was given to moderation of candidates’ coursework folders. These had been awarded provisional grades by the students’ teachers. The majority of teachers attended these meetings, although they were not compelled to do so; schools and colleges could choose to accept the area moderator’s assessment of student work without involving their peers in the discussion. Each school or college brought a sample of candidates’ folders: these were discussed to indicate the standard to be held to in the succeeding internal moderation. Delegates to the meeting worked in groups, putting the folders in order of merit, and adjusting marks where

necessary to ensure a reliable ranking across the consortium. In case of irresolvable dispute or indecision, the area moderator would decide the rank order. Participants seemed to gain satisfaction from being part of the assessment as well as the teaching process, and the opportunity to see at first hand the work of their peers in other centres.

Coursework

A well-balanced example (Hodgson 1995) of an A grade folder from the early 1990s included the following assignments:

1. Pastiche of Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*.
2. What impressions have some of Sylvia Plath's poems made on you?
3. Retell the events of *The Caretaker* as if you were one of the characters.
4. Comment on the style and technique of Graham Swift in one chapter of *Waterland*.
5. Lear refers to his "two pernicious daughters" (III.ii.22). How far is he justified in his statement?
6. Miller's skill as a playwright as shown in *Death of a Salesman*.
7. An Appreciation of *Paradise Lost* IV 205-222.
8. Non-Fiction: An Environmental Proposal by Nirex, based on Swift's *Modest Proposal*.
9. Extended Essay: My Struggle (non-fiction): *Under the Eye of the Clock* by Christopher Nolan, with reference to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou).

This submission came from one of the more adventurous centres, and reflects some characteristics of the teachers' approach. The books studied were a selection from a wider range of texts, some of which had been read in class in some detail, some of which had been studied independently. The assignments tended to encourage, in differing proportions, both affective engagement (e.g. titles 2 and 3) and awareness of form (e.g. titles 1, 4 and 6). These were achieved by creative as well as by analytic writing, creative response being required by titles 1, 3 and 8: title 8 was also the required assignment based a non-fiction text. The student commentary was incisive and demonstrated awareness of the texts as texts, with specific generic, formal and historical characteristics. A dialogue between students and teacher evident in the margins and in the student/teacher comments on the cover sheet. There was also an invigorating encouragement of irreverence, wit and divergent readings in the extended essay (Nolan and Angelou) and in the *King*

Lear assignment, in which the student had decided to see things from Goneril and Regan's point of view.

Coursework offered opportunities to widen the range of students' writing as well as of their reading. Pastiche and parody, for example, allowed the writer to explore the text in a personal, affective way and to write in a creative mode, demonstrating grasp of form, character and theme. These qualities are shown in an extract from a student's assignment on Jane Austen's *Emma*: "Write the letter from Jane Fairfax to Frank Churchill breaking off their engagement."

... Soon after this you remarked on how fortunate the Eltons were in meeting each other and finding such happiness together in a public place like Bath. Most marriages that begin like that, you said, are unsuccessful. Surely you must have meant me to take this as a reference to our own engagement made under similar circumstances at Weymouth. You must be able to imagine my reaction to this. I felt extremely anxious. Although I had been observing your attitudes to Miss Woodhouse with increasing consternation and embarrassment over the past weeks and months, I was most concerned on hearing such a confirmation of my worst fears in front of so many of our mutual friends. The reply I then made tried to find out if this was actually your meaning. When you said nothing, I could not discount my fears. Therefore I feel the engagement to be a source of repentance and misery to us both: I dissolve it.

Other creative assignments discussed in consortium meetings included the use of a minor character in one play as a major one in another (after *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*); an Ode, with commentary, after reading Keats; and additional dialogue, in the style of Harold Pinter, occurring offstage in *The Caretaker* (Hodgson 1995; NATE 2004).

The most significant piece of coursework (in terms of allocated marks) was the "extended" essay, a comparative study of two or more texts normally linked by theme, period or author.

The Extended Essay

The extended essay originally accounted for 11.1% and went on to account for 16.6% of the assessment. In Greenwell's view, this too was a brilliant innovation, for a variety of reasons. It gave the students a chance to do something approaching individual scholarship. Two, usually three books were studied, usually on a theme. The themes chosen might sometimes have been unexpected in an academic context, but, like the open-book exam questions, they gave students scope to develop their interests and responses. More than one adolescent horse-rider found interest in

writing about *Black Beauty*, *St. Mawr*, and poems by Edwin Muir or Ted Hughes. Greenwell remembers more than one student who compared three novels about people with hearing impairment. Students had to read more widely, and so did the staff. Greenwell comments:

If you had a group of 17 students, that was 51 books in the mix, and, even after reducing the number by duplication, or because a few students studied two, you were still left as a teacher with reading to do. It was exciting. It was how I came to read Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, how I came to read David Cook's *Walter*, how I came to read Trevor, Irving, Wain, Spark, Piercey, Alther, Le Guin, and countless others. I am not saying I didn't read beforehand, but it certainly increased my range, and the range of the teachers in my department (as it became after 1986). When Prime Minister Major and Lord Griffiths set in train the wrecking of coursework, it was suggested that English Literature A level needed to be "broader". 753 required you to study at least six books for coursework, plus three for the extended essay, plus five further ones for the exam: 14 books in all. After 2000, this was "broadened" to 7 or 8. And the longer piece became contrastive, and the home of proof that you had read opposing critics. 753/660 reduced a reliance on secondary sources: the text and imagination gained primacy.

A few examples of extended essay topics chosen within local consortia include: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare; An evaluation of Hardy's heroines; Self-determination in the face of oppression, as portrayed in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Beloved*, and the poems of Grace Nichols; a study of children's readings of AA Milne and Lewis Carroll; Stephen King's portrayal of small-town America in three novels; and a study of banned and censored literature, focusing on *The Satanic Verses*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Hodgson 1995; NATE 2004). Students would prepare the work over a number of weeks, overseen by the teacher. The best extended essay in Greenwell's experience (it gained 120/120) compared narrative technique in *At-Swim-Two-Birds*, *Tristram Shandy* and *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* – which started to unpick the form of the extended essay as it went along (the conclusion was in the middle).

Validity and reliability

Reflection on the validity and reliability of this work (more than 20 years after the course described was curtailed by governmental order) suggests two observations. The first concerns the validity of this A-level study in relation to the practices of higher education for which (at least some of the) students were being prepared. Although the pedagogic and accessible practices of the AQA course were distinctly different from what preceded them, its implicit assumptions about literary study were little influenced by the cultural turn which by 1990 had transformed English studies in higher education. In these post-modern days, alerted as we are to the death of the author, the so-

cial production of discourse, and the instability of narrative, the implied trust in the personal response of the student may seem naïve. However, there is little evidence that the cultural turn in higher education has necessarily supported students in developing an informed response based upon textual evidence: indeed, the opposite could be argued (Snapper 2009; Hodgson 2010). More reflective students taking the AEB English Literature course would have understood that the literary text was constructed within the discourse fields of its writers and readers, although they would not have expressed the idea in such terms.

The second observation is that the course as written and taught offered (whatever its theoretical limitations) a high degree of validity and reliability in terms of educating candidates' responses to a wide range of literary texts and assessing these accurately. This was achieved firstly through open-book examinations that, in Greenwell's view, "killed question-spotting stone dead":

Traditional "sudden death" exams encouraged a learned (teacher's) response. I inherited my own A level teacher's fondness for question-spotting - I had written the answer to "Is *The Seagull* a comedy?" (set by the Oxford & Cambridge board 30 years before Curriculum 2000 banned the study of literature in translation) five times before it arrived before me in the actual exam. Peter Buckroyd killed question-spotting stone dead. The questions required informed response to textual detail that could not be anticipated.

The second guarantor of validity was the coursework component, which was, in Tomlinson's (2004) terms, "the work of the course" rather than a single unit of work prepared for internal assessment. Eight of the nine pieces of coursework were simply essays produced as part of on-going classroom interactions: their validity derived in part from their not being specially worked up for the assessment. Students would normally write more than the required number of essays and would choose the best for their folder. Each essay was worth just over 4% of the total marks for the course, and thus was not a high-stakes assessment. For this reason, and because of the teacher's knowledge of the student's characteristic work, plagiarism and cheating were rare. Moreover, as described above, the consortium system produced a developmental community of practice which ensured a high level of reliable, standardised assessment within and between centres.

Professional protest

Given the commitment and enthusiasm of the many teachers and students who were engaged in this course, its curtailment in 1993 prompted much professional protest. Several Cambridge Uni-

versity Directors of Studies in English wrote (Cambridge 2003) to the Times Educational Supplement to say that students who had followed coursework A levels showed exceptional mastery of and skill at handling texts. The NATE Post-16 Committee wrote to Sir Ron Dearing, then Chair of the Secondary Education and Assessment Committee (SEAC), to argue the validity and reliability of the course. The committee argued that the recently published SEAC *Assessment Objectives for English Literature* were best achieved by means of coursework. The requirement that students should “respond with understanding to texts of different types and periods” implied the need for wide reading. Understanding “the ways in which writers' choices of form, structure and language express meaning” was best achieved by learning to write in authors' styles. “Knowledge of the contexts in which literary works are written and understood” could be achieved by the research possibilities of coursework. The capacities to “discuss their own and other readers' interpretations of texts” and to “produce informed, independent opinions and judgements” were nurtured by coursework, which involved teachers and students discussing together texts for study, and approaches to this study; it was the basis of the confident mastery of literature and ideas on which the Universities had commented so favourably. Finally, the committee argued, coursework prepares students for life by requiring independent work, for a specific readership, to be drafted, revised, and finished by an agreed date. Why should the learning of these skills be postponed to continuous assessment courses in HE?

Dearing's reply - that teachers could carry on doing these good things under the new dispensation - ignored the inevitable effect of assessment mode upon learning. Twenty-three years later, we can see the widespread deleterious effects of repeated attempts to gain validity and reliability by a retrogressive curriculum externally assessed. The issue here is not only the well-publicised incapacity of the assessment organisations to produce consistently reliable and acceptable results (see e.g. QCA 2002). More serious, in terms of the validity of student work, is the governmental imposition of a narrow curriculum tied to a system of teacher accountability that breeds inauthentic practices. John Dixon's “personal growth” is still the principle of English teaching that gains the allegiance of a majority of practitioners (Goodwyn 2012), but the pressure on students and teachers to produce “results” ensures that the extrinsic value of a grade or mark matters more than the intrinsic value of authentic student creation and interpretation. The competitive, individualistic need to achieve a superior grade fuels a multiplicity of websites that will write university (and school) students' essays for them for a fee. Oxbridge Essays (2016), for example, “offer essays and essay plans, dissertations, presentations, coursework and model exam answers for students at every level of study”.

Conclusion

“Personal response” ends here. In the current competitive, individualistic, inauthentic climate of what might be called institutionalised cheating, the AEB/AQA 753/660 English Literature A-level course stays in the memory of many English teachers as a touchstone of what validity and reliability might mean in English curriculum and assessment. It gave us control over at least part of the course. It enabled us to choose texts for and with the students, and to encourage students’ authentic responses in a variety of genres. It enabled us to learn from colleagues while jointly discussing and assessing our students’ work. Most of all, it gave a sense of personal purpose, allowing the talent and creativity of both students and teachers to be authentically validated.

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