

SHARING TEACHING EXPERIENCES III

**TELLC Workshop:
Teaching English Language, Literature
and Culture, Volume 3**

Sara Martín Alegre (ed.)

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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SARA MARTÍN ALEGRE. PREFACE: CONTINUING THE DEBATE

The papers now in the hands of the reader were written for the third and fourth TELLC (Teaching English Language, Literature and Culture) workshops, celebrated, respectively, on 25 November 2016 and 17 November 2017. I was myself once again the organizer. Having now reached its fourth edition, I can safely say that TELLC is consolidated as integral part of our Department's culture. I must thank, then, my colleagues, for supporting the initiative. Everyone who attended the meetings was satisfied; all commented on how necessary the workshop was. I do feel, then, more than sufficiently encouraged to go on.

Not all participants, however, have chosen to develop their oral presentations into written work, which is why the 2016 and 2017 editions have resulted in just a small selection of papers, comprising about one fourth of all presented (this also explains why two of the articles are signed by yours truly). The main novelty this time, as you will see, is the students' participation. I am pleased to say that the book club they demand in their article is now operative; I do hope that the experiment continues and that it becomes yet another basic part of our Department's life.

One word of warning: the papers here published are not intended to be the same type of scholarly article published in the many excellent journals devoted to teaching language and Literature, among which I must name the *Bellaterra Journal of Teaching & Learning Language & Literature* (<http://revistes.uab.cat/jtl3/index>), edited by UAB colleague Melinda Dooly. I believe that many teachers do want to discuss their teaching but feel that, since pedagogy is not their research field, they need to make an extra effort to master the specific bibliography and academic jargon required by specialized publications. This effort may be too intensive, given our time constraints, which means that very few teachers end up publishing academic work about their own teaching practice. My aim in organizing TELLC and publishing the corresponding booklets is far more modest: it consists of allowing teachers to communicate as if in conversation for, after all, this is what workshops are for. This does not mean, I believe

and sincerely hope, that the papers here reproduced are in any way less relevant (or useful) than other kinds of scholarly work. They are at least as relevant, if not more.

The papers, published in chronological order as I received them, reflect a variety of teaching experiences, as it is to be expected. Andrea Huerta's piece "Promoting Students' Motivation by Means of Technology" offers advice on how to update our teaching, taking advantage of the use of cell phones in the classroom and turning this habit from a problem into an advantage. My own article "Re-inventing Exams: An Experience" describes an initial attempt to do what is now part of my teaching: inviting students to write their own exam questions (yes, it works!). David Owen's "*In Absentia sed in Propria Persona: Teacher-Produced Podcasts*" offers a very practical approach to, as the title announces, the production of podcasts (thus connecting with Huerta's piece, as well). Andrew Monnickendam's article "Assessment and Creativity at MA Level" deals with a teaching experience still too infrequent among us: inviting students to produce Literature (in imitation of the set texts) to increase their awareness of the writing process. My second piece, "Close Reading: The Problem of the Long Text" considers the problem of how to continue implementing a methodology based on reading at a time when students simply reject reading. Finally, our degree students Paola Nicolás, Ivana Boyanska and Helena Style offer in "English Studies: A Perspective from the Students' Point of View" a constructive critique of the lows and highs of our four-year BA, accompanied by very useful suggestions for improvement.

Enjoy!!

Sara Martín Alegre

March 2018

Sara.Martin@uab.cat

<http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre>

<http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre>

ANDREA HUERTA BON. PROMOTING STUDENTS' MOTIVATION BY MEANS OF TECHNOLOGY

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

andrea.huerta@uab.cat

February 2017

ABSTRACT: It is clear as day that university students and technology are inseparable. However, we cannot always say the same about teachers. In order to motivate students, it would be a good idea to introduce –from time to time – some technological tools in the classroom. The aim of this article is to present two user-friendly online tools that can be easily used in the university classroom both to motivate the student and reinforce the lessons by adding an alternative and engaging charm to the class. These tools are Kahoot, which allows you to create online quiz-competitions and PollEverywhere, an online screen that offers you different and useful possibilities and to which students can send their personal words and messages. The devices that connect both the teacher and the students are the classroom computer and the students' mobile phones. Let us offer our students the possibility to enjoy themselves and learn by means of the technology that the world is offering to us, teachers. This may be a way to discover new teaching perspectives.

Keywords: technology; online tools; motivation; language teaching

Technology is everywhere. Computers, mobile phones and tablets are now part of our daily lives. Moreover - and perhaps most importantly - they are present in the university classrooms. Students and digital devices have become inseparable. Yet, some teachers do not feel comfortable with the idea of integrating technology in their lesson. According to Fabbry and Higgs (1997), there is much of a controversy over the presence of technology in the classroom, but it has been demonstrated that it has many positive effects on achievement.

As a result, laptops, tablets and phones may be a teaching tool that some teachers have not taken advantage of yet. Furthermore, some hold there are several negative impacts of using these devices in the classroom, owing to the fact they may distract students and make them disconnect from the real face-to-face classroom communication. Some even stand exposure to wireless devices may be harmful for the human body.

However, there are numerous advantages to the use of digital devices as part of the lesson every now and then. The spontaneity with which students use their devices and which grants instant access to wider and supplemental information (Antonucci, 2014) may contribute to enrich the lesson. In addition, digital devices can add an engaging charm to the - possibly - not so attractive lesson. In Revere and Kovach's (2011) words, "technology and content combined impulse education, promoting a learner-centered environment through engaging activities".

So as to motivate students, there are some online applications that offer teachers the chance to interact with them through online quiz-competitions and virtual polls. In this article, we are going to present two of these platforms, *Kahoot* and *PollEverywhere*. Nevertheless, these are only two among a wide range of different options.

The first one, *Kahoot*, is an Italian application that was created by teachers and students. It allows users to generate quiz-based-competitions for an unlimited number of participants who answer questions in real-time. It creates a fun and engaging learning environment.

There are three types of *Kahoots*: Quizzes, the most common type, which allows the teacher to create an unlimited number of questions and multiple-choice answers. Students are supposed to choose the right answer, which appears on their device among other possible choices. Discussions, or quick polls, are the second option and they offer teachers and learners the chance to facilitate effective conversations by asking simple questions with no wrong or right answer. Students can answer freely, again through their phones, tablets or laptops. Last but not least, surveys are the third type of *Kahoots*. Teachers can formulate questions and multiple-choice answers. However, as it happened with the discussions, there are no right or wrong answers.

Next in line, teachers can use *PollEverywhere*, which is an online application that allows users to create virtual polls for live audiences. Teachers can project questions, polls, images, instructions or simply words. Moreover, they can receive instant answers/feedback from their classroom.

Such an application is definitely great to liven up the class. In a very simple and fast way, students can send their personal answers, examples, words or messages.

What is more, it is anonymous, which can sometimes motivate the student to participate even more. Besides, the answers they send automatically appear on the online screen and the teacher has the chance to comment on them, if willing to do so. In addition, the answers remain in the system, so the teacher can access them later and use the data if s/he has the need to.

Both *Kahoot* and *PollEverywhere* are user-friendly platforms. Teachers can easily create accounts and it is not complicated to generate the activities, as long as they have basic computer knowledge. Therefore, given their simplicity, it is not about university teachers not being able to incorporate technology in their lessons, but about teachers willing to do so.

Reflecting on digital devices in the classroom should not be automatically related to a student getting distracted, but to learners being able to connect modern technology – 21st century life, their actual life - with the lesson they have just gone through. This connection may be the responsible for a motivated and enthusiastic group of students. As a matter of fact, the world is changing and, together with the world, teaching perspectives should evolve or, at least, be revised.

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SARA MARTÍN ALEGRE. RE-INVENTING EXAMS: AN EXPERIENCE

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Sara.Martin@uab.cat
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Exams were first introduced in China in 605 AD when the Sui Dynasty decided to use them as a method to select members of what we would call today its Civil Service. The imperial examination system was only abolished in 1905. By that time the East India Company had been already using exams for one century, since establishing in 1806 its own school to train candidates for positions in the administration. The same company introduced in 1829 specific examinations for a budding Indian Civil Service. The British Government made Civil Service exams official in 1855, when a Civil Service Commission was set up, following the recommendations of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854 which were inspired by the Chinese system.

I have not been able to properly reference this piece of information, but apparently the current Cambridge language tests, in particular the Proficiency examination, descend from this type of Imperial exam. Oral examinations had been common in European universities since the Middle Ages. However, the mid-19th century revolution in the methods to select civil servants, which emphasized written rather than oral exams, soon affected British and American higher education also from the 1850s onwards. Exams were also standardized which, ideally, should help to make curricula homogenous and testing results more reliable.

The British were keen to copy the Chinese system of meritocracy, though, of course, meritocracy can only properly work if state-sponsored education is made available to all children. Tellingly, primary education was made compulsory by law in Britain in 1870, fifteen years after the introduction of the Civil Service examination system. I ignore how exactly it was decided that school-children should be examined as if they were prospective Civil Servants and who made the decision. My guess is that the reasoning behind this was that the tests developed for the Civil Service also had the attribute of placing individuals into a well-organized hierarchy, something that

employers always find useful. Today, we still use exams to grade students' work and, so, to place persons in the specific category of the 'university graduate'.

Final written exams came to be considered noxious because they gave students only once chance to impress a teacher with their performance. This is why they were replaced by a variety of exercises; in the end, however, final marks tend to be quite similar. As teachers, we all have the very peculiar experience of seeing how, no matter how many exercises you include in continuous assessment, each student's final mark corresponds to a combination of our initial personal impression and the first exercise they produce. Written exams, then, play a lesser role today but we, teachers, still cling to them, perhaps mainly because we believe that a classroom exercise is the only way we have to test our students' real command of English. Also, some colleagues argue that students should never write papers, which I personally prefer, for they plagiarize all the time—which, surely, must be an exaggeration.

I hated written exams as a student and do not particularly like them as a teacher because I find them to be a highly artificial exercise. In which situation of real life, I wonder, would you be pressured into writing an essay on, say, Wordsworth, in 90 minutes, which is all we have today? I associate this, rather, with journalism's tight deadlines. Also, I'm persuaded that exams mostly measure people's ability to take exams. Or negative ability: I myself performed well but only after bouts of nausea and vomiting that did nothing for my faith in the use of exams as a teacher. My constant nervous state as a student is the reason why I dislike very much putting my students under such unnecessary stress.

Accordingly, I play all kinds of tricks to deconstruct exams. I believe that good academic work requires a time of preparation (not just of cramming), which is why in some courses, such as Victorian Literature (second year), I have given students the exam questions in advance. I am not the kind of teacher who takes pride in failing students and I find that those who fail in my courses usually trip themselves up by not handing in exercises or not taking the exams. I find more satisfaction in helping my students to do well enough for me to pass them. This does not mean that they pass no matter how they perform, just that I don't want anyone vomiting before taking one of

my exams. I want them to have studied and, above all, to have planned their exam answers at home.

I have found out, however, that when given the exam questions in advance students get quite nervous for a reason I failed to anticipate: if you know the questions beforehand, then a good deal of the justification to fail vanishes. Who would have thought that Prof. Martín would ask such a devious question? That seems to be the kind of thinking that comforts students that do poorly. Now, if Prof. Martín puts her questions in your hands, thus eliminating the surprise factor (not quite the deviousness as you'll see), that's another matter. Your inability to plan the answers is highlighted, something far more embarrassing than being unable to answer an unexpected question.

You might argue that surprise is the whole point of exams and the target that collective groan you hear when students find the questions too hard. This is not a sound I enjoy (my exams, in contrast, seem to produce plenty of sighs). What happened when I gave students a set of questions to take home, consider and plan is that, still, some failed (25% in the 2016-17 edition of Victorian Literature). I felt less responsible for their failing, yet I was at a loss to explain why they had not taken advantage of my method. I also noticed, in surprise, that the effort done in the actual writing in class was similar: the same stream of sighs, the same flushed faces and the hurried writing (some students run out of time no matter how long you give them). The pressure eased, the quality increased, hopefully there had been no vomiting, but, then, this was still an exam written by the teacher.

For my latest elective course, 'Prosa Anglesa: Considering Science Fiction' (semester B, 2015-16), I have tried another tactic: inviting students to write their own exams. In hindsight I realize that no exam questions can match the deviousness of this proposal but I was really acting in good faith. The group was small, only 15 students, and I explained that they should write a two-question exam using the habitual format: select a passage from the corresponding novel (maximum 10 lines) and ask a question which can be answered in a 500-word argumentative essay (written in about 45 minutes).

Realizing that students would feel insecure without my checking their questions, I decided to validate each exam a few days before the exam date. On the whole, students wrote perfectly valid questions though badly phrased. Some of the questions were too big in scope for a short essay but could be mostly used; others came multiplied by two or three as students doubted which version to use. No question was insultingly easy to answer, and here's where my deviousness was highlighted.

I suppose that students quickly saw that though the chances to fail had dramatically diminished, writing your own exam can be very difficult as I would not validate shallow questions. They faced, then, a twofold task: producing an exam similar in difficulty to what I would write myself and do it so that they could still secure a pass. To be honest, I had not gone that far in my own thinking when I proposed the experiment.

Exam one went well: nobody failed, though I believe that nobody performed at a higher level than if I had written the exam myself. Nonetheless, students seemed more relaxed and confident about what they were doing, having got the annoying surprise element out of the equation. As I have noted, a common view is that written exams have the added bonus of offering exact information about the actual command of English each student possesses. I dispute this. By giving students the questions or asking them to write their own questions, I also forced them to work on their English at home and to produce far more polished exams (much easier to correct for me, too). I don't know how they did this: I would write the answers at home (using the dictionary, etc.), try to memorize as much as I could and then write them in class. Most likely, however, they memorized outlines. What is clear is that many language doubts and errors could be ironed out at home. In this way they had to learn some English language in order to prepare the exam, in addition to the English Literature.

For the second exam I asked students to produce questions combining both a passage from the primary source and one from a secondary source. I had asked students to read one article for each novel and I expected them to use these articles. However, some students chose other articles, which was a bit complicated to negotiate. I validated all their exams eventually. Ironically, and this was both silly and

funny, it was less easy for me to validate the exams in which my own article was quoted. I sensed a kind of mutual embarrassment: students seemed to feel a bit awkward writing ‘As Martín claims’, which was not the case when they wrote ‘As Vint claims’, or ‘As Frelik claims’, for they didn’t know these scholars personally. Besides, I found myself disagreeing with how students had read my own article, even though their questions were perfectly valid.

In both exams the content reflected very accurately class discussion. The questions did refer with no significant exceptions to the issues we had analyzed together, though the passages chosen were not necessarily the ones I had selected for class discussion. The exams were, in short, more personal and less ‘parasitical’ on class discussion than I expected (this was my main fear). Some exams, particularly in the second series, were actually quite sophisticated. When marking them, I often marvelled that students who knew nothing about science fiction a few months back were confidently discussing the representation of artificial intelligence, genetic manipulation or post-humanism in the novels selected.

I made, however, one mistake. I decided, exceptionally, to use exams because I wanted students to read the five novels in the course—if they wrote a paper, then they might read just one or two. What I failed to notice is that the second exam, covering three novels, should have been much longer, perhaps two hours and a half, rather than one and a half. And we simply don’t have that kind of time. If you recall, in old times (before Bologna-style BA degrees) exams had a separate schedule, apart from teaching time. Since 2009, however, when we implemented the new BA degree, exams are part of our teaching time. This means, logically, that the more exams you introduce the less time you have for teaching; also that they need to fit our tight 90-minute slots. To recap, either I introduced a third exam, or I let students choose two of the three novels for the second exam, which is what I finally did. Some, then, got away with reading only four, rather than five, novels.

Allow me to read now the feedback I got from two students. I did ask three times at least but only these two persons answered back. I’m not sure what this means, as I gave the chance to give negative feedback by asking for feedback once the

course was over and students had got their final grades. Clàudia, a local student wrote:

My experience of writing my own exams is really good. In my opinion, writing your own exam makes you go further in your research about the topic. Not only you have to find all the information you can get about the question but about the book in general, as well as about the concrete topic. If the teachers write the questions for their students, they [the students] will just probably read the book and nothing more than that, just to make sure that they will be able to answer whatever question they get.

Having to make [sic] my own questions made me realize that you can get a lot more about a book, than just the plot and some simple topics that are easy to see and understand. It made me see and go deep into more topics that maybe were not that easy to see when reading the book, and then I had to choose a topic and a question, which made me have the possibility to do a research on a topic that I was interested in.

Sean, an Irish Erasmus student wrote:

About my experience of the exams –it was a completely new experience for me, but it was one that I think I enjoyed! I always perform better when writing essays, so I liked the fact that I had some time to prepare what I was going to write. I think it probably led to a more in-depth answer. If not more in-depth, at least more organised and structured. With ‘normal’, unseen exams, I tend to panic and just write down everything I know on the subject, usually because I am stressed about time constraints, etc. and don’t have time to map out an answer. Also, getting to write my own exam questions meant that I got to focus on an area of the novels that I found particularly interesting (social/cultural contexts). I may have struggled had it been one question for everyone, as it may have been an area I did not enjoy or fully understand. Finally, I think it was very important for you to validate our questions. In this way, it meant that I had to come up with a question that both I would enjoy and would meet your standards.

James, a mature Erasmus student, told me in despair after sending me his first exam that this was the hardest thing he had ever done in his life, yet he passed both exams brilliantly. Or perhaps he did so because he made an unusual effort.

Was the experiment worth carrying out, then? Certainly. I think that the class size was ideal, as validating the questions—not an easy task—could be done in a reasonably short time. Also, these were fourth year students. I don’t see myself repeating the experiment with second-year students in the Victorian Literature course because a) they would absolutely panic, b) at about 50, the group is too big and validating the exams would consume too much time and energy.

To sum up, I believe that my experiment in tailor-made examination shows that asking everyone the same question is counterproductive, for each student is motivated

by different aspects of the same book we analyze. What we do when we ask all students in our class the same question, then, is just something convenient but not sound in pedagogical terms. We also tend to ignore the fact that, beyond what each student has studied in preparation for the exam, some will automatically do well (or badly) because of how they react to stress. Diminishing stress enhances performance in all cases, and this is why if I get the chance again I might repeat the experience. I still believe, however, that only papers give an exact measure of a students' academic abilities and that written exams should eventually be abolished.

DAVID OWEN. *IN ABSENTIA SED IN PROPRIA PERSONA:* TEACHER-PRODUCED PODCASTS

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

David.Owen@uab.cat

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ABSTRACT: There are many moments throughout a course when a teacher may wish to provide material for student access outside the scheduled class itself. This may correspond to the need to reinforce a particular aspect of the course; to add complementary considerations; or to provide alternative or additional material to the core programme. Most universities now facilitate such requirements through virtual-campus platforms, which have formed an increasingly central part of university teaching over recent years.

However, there are also moments when this non-class material may need class-like comment from the teacher; there are also times when a teacher is absent or is unable to give a class because of its cancellation. This paper will focus on the use of podcasts as a means of covering these needs. Podcasts offer a highly effective means of ensuring that students receive class-like content even when circumstances make it impossible to give the scheduled class. The paper is of a practical nature; it will review basic recording techniques and podcast platforms on the basis of zero-cost podcast production. It aims to give a clear indication of how to produce an effective podcast that can then be published on a virtual campus or in a Moodle classroom.

Keywords: podcasts, teacher resources, Soundtrap, Soundcloud

Introduction

Presenting podcasts to a group of fellow teaching professionals in 2017 as a sort of ‘innovation’ in classroom practice within the ambit of English Studies is not unlike presenting an idea called The Wheel as trailblazing technology to a group of modern-day car mechanics. To put it mildly, the podcast is not exactly cutting-edge technology. Podcasts have been around for many years now: a proto-form known as ‘audioblogging’ was available as early as the 1980s, and grew in popularity during the 1990s; the format became even more successful with the massive availability of broadband internet and the introduction of portable audio players such as the first-generation iPods (both of these dating from the early 2000s). The basic elements that

podcasts depend on, namely, access to the Internet and simple digital-recording facilities, are at-hand today on practically every mobile phone and therefore accessible to almost any individual who owns such a device. To cite an obvious area of application, their use in language teaching (in which they are often produced by students themselves, though this modality is not the focus of my concern here) is very well-attested. Clearly, at this stage of events, the underlying function of podcasts—which is that of making self-produced audio content available in a non-synchronic manner—needs little justification or introduction. So why talk about them here?

Podcasts provide audio content that, as I have already suggested, can be accessed whenever the listener chooses (provided its availability has not been deadline restricted or obstructed by password protection). Additionally—as with all web content, of course—they can be accessed from absolutely anywhere. Naturally, this makes them ideal for providing supplementary materials or comment and reflection on such materials. But also, and this is the reason for my discussion of what is otherwise a well-recognised technology, precisely for their non-synchronicity and global availability podcasts are a highly suitable tool with which teachers can directly compensate for short-term absences from class, for reasons such as conference attendance, Erasmus exchange visits, important meetings that cannot be re-arranged, examination committees or simply ‘indisposition’. In other words, podcasts represent an engaging and highly constructive alternative—both for teachers and for students—to simply handing out extra reading or to catching up on lost ground in later classes. And, not unimportantly, they obviate having to ask over-worked colleagues for the favour of taking an extra class or two. In effect, podcasts can even allow a class to take place virtually, avoiding the need to actually cancel a session, and providing students with practical teaching input (possibly even the very same material that would have been given in the scheduled class), in spite of the teacher’s physical absence from that class. Finally, the production and publishing of a podcast can be low-tech and yet very effective; it can be done at absolutely no financial cost; and it’s extraordinarily simple.

With this use of podcasts most particularly in mind, my discussion will be structured as follows: Part One will briefly outline the characteristics of podcast production; Part Two will provide a step-by-step guide to (a) producing and (b)

publishing a short podcast on the Soundcloud platform; Part Three will list a few suggestions for making podcasts sound better and for ensuring a more effective reception by the students. The Final Remarks will draw these strands together. By the end, you should be entirely able to record and publish your own podcasts.

Part One

The Oxford Online Dictionary of English (<<http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/>>) provides the following definitions for 'podcast':

- (n) A digital audio file made available on the Internet for downloading to a computer or mobile device, typically available as a series, new instalments of which can be received by subscribers automatically.
- (v) Make (a digital audio file) available as a podcast.

This is a good working definition that mostly suits my purposes here, except for the idea of instalments, which—though clearly a characteristic feature—is by no means a sine qua non, and for the concomitant notion of automatic subscription. A single-issue recording posted on the Internet (for example, of material for a class at which the teacher is unable to be physically present) can also be covered by this definition.

So, there are basically two parts to making a podcast: first, we start by making a digital audio file (that is, a recording); then, one way or another, we make that file available on Internet.

Computers, mobile phones and tablets generally have an array of audio-recording options already installed, and alternative recorders (some free, others not, mostly offering better-than-default features such as more complex tonal controls or a larger number of file-type outputs) are very easy to find and install on the usual platforms such as the App Store for Macs/iOS or Google Play for PCs and Android. But in fact default recorders, by which I mean those that are pre-installed on whatever device you might wish to record with, are perfectly acceptable. Other digital recorders would also (obviously) serve the same purpose, but in this discussion I'll limit my description to those elements that require no further searching, installation or payment (however, although the inbuilt microphone on your device will suffice for this type of podcast, it hardly needs pointing out that a recording can be greatly enhanced

by the use of a microphone. USB microphones suitable for computers can be purchased cheaply and will provide a richer audio input).

Once a recording has been made and stored, it then needs to be published on Internet so that it can subsequently be accessed. There are many ways of doing this: the file link can be shared with your students through the usual channels such as e-mail or on a Moodle platform such as Virtual Campus; but we'll also look at a straightforward publishing option that provides its own dedicated link to the file and which will allow you to store several such files on the same specific page.

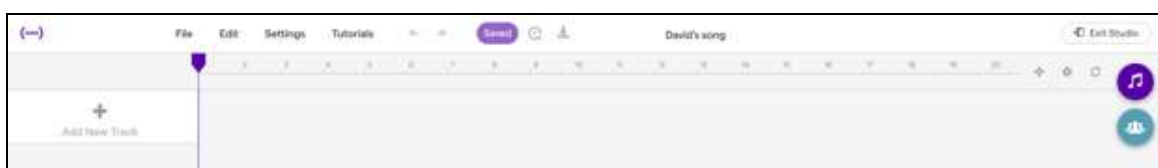
Part Two

Recording

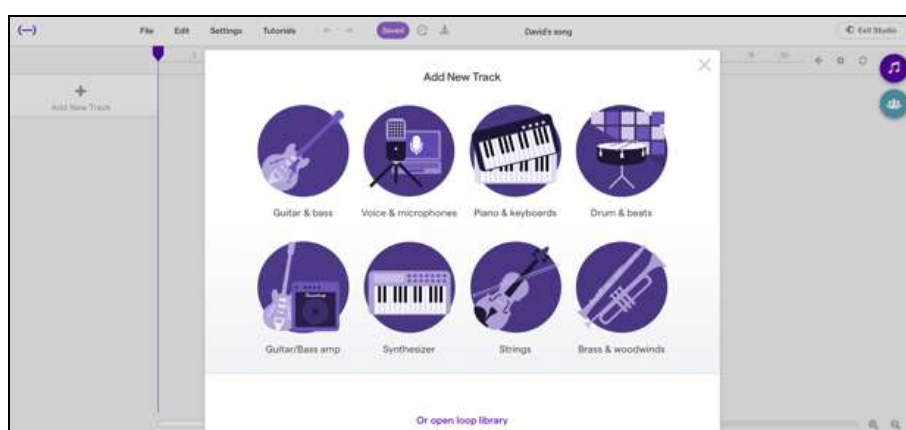
As I've mentioned, a recording can be made in several ways. The simplest is probably on a mobile phone, most of which have basic pre-installed apps called something like Voice Memos or Voice Recorder. These apps mimic a tape recorder, with a record button and simple play and erase functions. Once you have finished your recording, you will be able to share it (via e-mail or other applications) as a digital file. Similar recording procedures are available for tablets and computers; these also produce a digital file that can then be shared.

However, I would like to describe a slightly alternative procedure—one that can also be carried out in a straightforward way on mobiles, tablets or computers—which allows you to record your podcast in a basic online recording-studio environment and, if you like, to tweak the resulting audio output so that you don't sound as if you're broadcasting to the world from inside an empty biscuit tin. This involves accessing the Soundtrap platform (<<http://www.soundtrap.com/>>) and signing-up for a free account. As with many such platforms, you will also be offered paid options, but in this case, these are probably only of interest to musicians. The account will allow you access to a basic recording studio in which you can either directly record or else make use of pre-recorded sound templates. The steps to access the studio and to record are as follows (these indications are also valid for the mobile/tablet version):

1. Open Soundtrap and either set up an account or log in to it if you've previously registered.
2. You will be presented with a home page that contains a number of items; of particular relevance is the "My Projects" folder, which will eventually house whatever you produce.
3. On this home page, locate the "Enter Studio" button, and click.
4. This takes you into the studio environment.
5. In this section, you'll see six templates (if you wanted, you could dismiss these by clicking the "x" on the top right of the "Select Template" box). There's actually a "Podcast" template, but it's a little too complicated for our purposes here: it has multiple tracks, effects and music, none of which is likely to be required in our context. Instead, click on "Blank".
6. This, in turn, takes you into an empty session (Figure 1), to which you will add a recording of your voice.

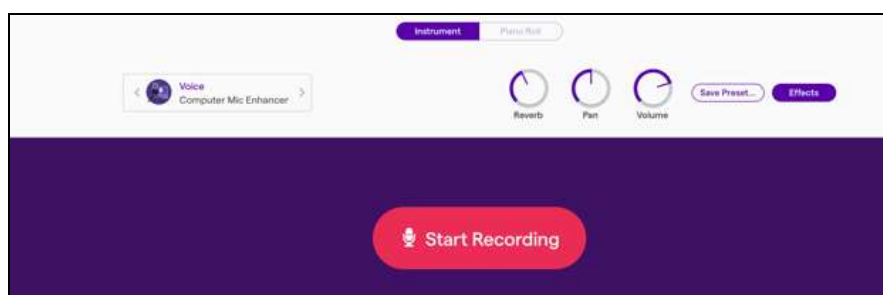


7. In this session, click on "Add New Track" on the top left of the screen.
8. A screen with eight instrument types will now appear (Figure 2). Select "Voice and Microphones".



9. You'll now be presented with a voice-type selector (Figure 3), which enables you to choose a suitable sound for your voice recording. Clicking on the forward or back arrows within the voice box will show you different options; "Podcast" (not surprisingly) is best for our current purposes, and (unlike recording in the voice memo

of your mobile phone, for example) will ensure a carefully balanced quality of sound. The other buttons (“Reverb”; “Pan”; “Volume”) can be left untouched. If you’d like to experiment with them, however, just do so. “Reverb” adds a degree of echo (default is about 40%); “Pan” makes the track prominent to the left or right ear (default is central); and “Volume” needs no explanation (default is about 70%).



10. Finally, click on “Start Recording” (the big red button towards the lower part of the screen) and begin speaking. There’s an on-screen countdown of about 5 seconds. The recording button changes into a “Stop”. Whenever you want to pause or stop, simply press this button. When you do so, it changes back to “Start Recording”. To resume, press this again.

11. When you’re finished, click “Save” (top centre); edit the track name (next to “Save”) and wait for the track to mix (a “mixing” indication will be shown in the button next to “Save”; when this disappears (after a few seconds or so) your track is ready to download (click on the icon to the right of the “Save” button). Your track will also be saved in “My Projects”, which you can access by exiting the studio (top right), which takes you back to the home page. To download anything you have recorded, simply click on the track in the home page, enter the studio and download.

This process may look somewhat daunting at first, but it is in fact remarkably simple and very intuitive. And now we have our podcast saved (somewhere on your computer or mobile/tablet) and ready to post. The next question is how exactly do we publish this link (which is currently to a local digital file) so that everyone can access it?

Posting

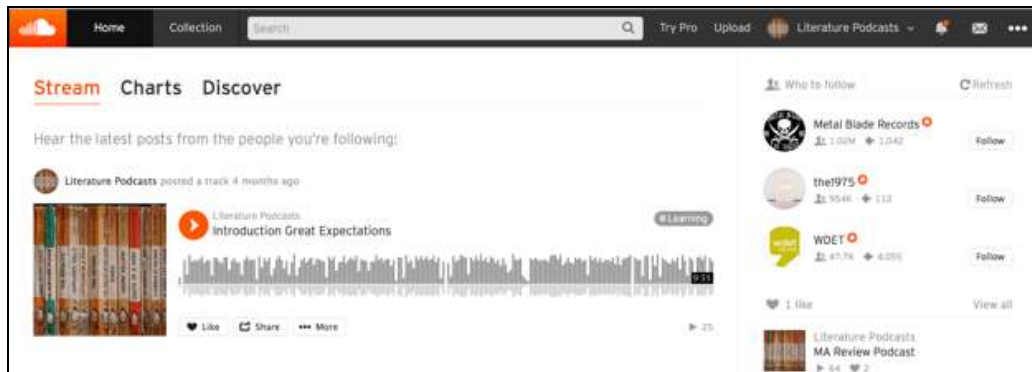
One obvious way, available to teachers in higher-education contexts such as ours, is to publish this file on the Virtual Campus platform (or similar Moodle-type service) provided by the institution. In this case, the file, although audio, can be treated as any other document that you would post for your class. Moodle facilitates this in editing mode, in which you can “Add an activity or resource”, then, within “Resources”, add a “File”. You now have your podcast available for students to access.

Quite possibly, this is sufficient for your purposes. However, there is an alternative approach that requires just a little more work but whose results are far more impressive, and that is to post the audio file on Soundcloud (<<http://www.soundcloud.com/>>), a name that is uncomfortably close to Soundtrap and therefore easy to confuse, but whose function is basically the opposite of an online studio in that it essentially serves to host music/podcasts that have already been recorded. As with Soundtrap, I will be considering only the free version, which provides a generous enough storage space for our purposes.

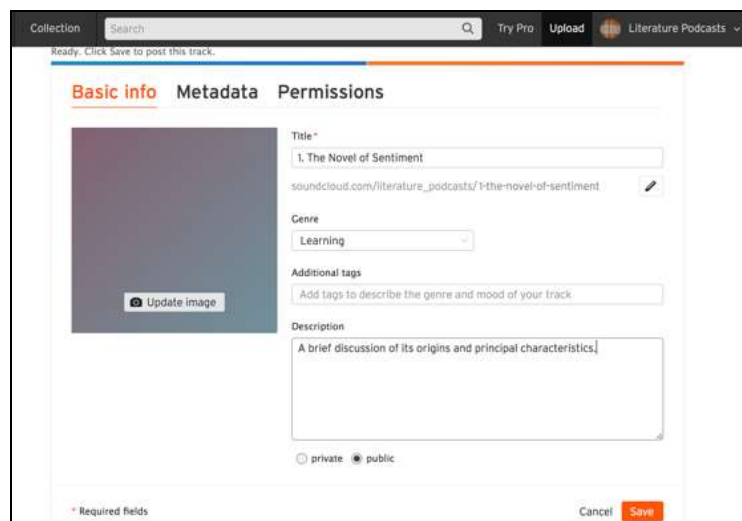
The two main advantages of Soundcloud in comparison to a Moodle format are, first, the ability to group several podcasts together within a single dedicated site (for example, all your podcasts; all the podcasts for a particular subject; all the podcasts for a particular year, etc.). And second, the posted audios have a timer slide, which allows you to point students to a particular section of an audio (“minute 6.07”, for instance), or even to link to a particular moment.

To post an audio file to Soundcloud, follow these steps:

1. Open Soundcloud and either set up an account or log in to it if you’ve previously registered.
2. You will be presented with a home page (similar to Figure 4, though initially empty).



3. Click on “Upload” (upper menu) and follow the indications.
4. Figure 5 shows the post-upload screen that allows you name your file (which then becomes part of the link name); indicate the genre of the audio (here, I’ve chosen “Learning”) and add additional tags and a description, if you so wish. Keeping the file public allows easiest access to it, so-unless you have reasons to limit access and are prepared to grant permissions on an individual basis-it’s best to indicate this option.



5. Once the file has been saved, you will find a link to “go to your track”. This will take you to a page like that in Figure 6. As you can see, the title of this particular account is “Literature Podcasts” and the track is “The Novel of Sentiment”. As you can also see, it’s possible to personalise this page by adding an image. To make this audio available to your students, click on “Share” (underneath the comment box).



6. Clicking on the share button brings up a screen like that in Figure 7, from which you can link to the entire track. You can also link to specific moments (by clicking “at” and indicating the audio time); this requires you to have listened to the track and to have identified the time of the segment in question, which can be done via the time bar (see Figure 6).



7. Finally, you can make the link available to your students in whatever way you wish (in Moodle, this would be through adding a URL in “Add an activity or resource”).

Part Three

Basic recording advice

It's important to have realistic expectations when preparing podcasts such as these. This is not a professional product and its limitations are fairly evident. All the same, a few simple ideas will help to maximise the quality of your recordings and make them more acceptable to listeners:

- It's always advisable to record using headphones if you can, as this will isolate you from surrounding sounds and help you focus more fully on the recording itself.
- Whilst a clear idea of what you want to say is obviously necessary (and can be helped by having a written structure of the podcast to hand), entirely scripted recordings will almost certainly sound very stilted and artificial, so my own view is that such an approach is best avoided.
- Don't be afraid to stop and start the recording; inevitably, this will result in a less fluid podcast, but, again, we are not aiming for a professional product.
- Think carefully about the length of recording that you want to provide your students with: more than about 15 minutes is unlikely to be very effective in most cases, as there are no visual aids in a podcast to facilitate comprehension. If you have more to say it's probably better to consider producing a series of short podcasts rather than sending out a single lengthy audio.

Finally, all teaching podcasts can be made more successful by providing students with a written indication of the structure of the recording and/or a range of questions or some follow-up work to accompany the recording.

Final Remarks

There are many circumstances in which a class simply cannot be held, either because the group as a whole is unable to meet or because the teacher cannot be present. Additionally, there are also circumstances in which complementary material made available to students ideally requires class-like comment from the teacher. These situations can very adequately be resolved through the use of podcasts.

This article has outlined a simple yet, I hope, effective way of recording and then publishing podcasts so that the resulting "product" is of sufficient quality to

ensure that students find it both useful and of sufficient minimum quality as a teaching resource that contributes to enhancing their understanding of a given subject.

Even a small degree of experimentation with the guideline steps presented here will enable teachers to personalise their own approaches to producing decent podcasts; additionally, adapting this information to your own teaching requirements should prove to be straightforward and also to provide you with a powerful teaching tool that can cover a range of needs that, whatever the specific situation, places the student at the very centre of a teacher's response to the call for complementary or *pro tempore* material.

ANDREW MONNICKENDAM. ASSESSMENT AND CREATIVITY AT MA LEVEL

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Andrew.monnickendam@uab.cat

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the use of creative assignments in Literature courses at MA level. The first part discusses several issues that justify its application, such as replacing the habit of compelling students to do things with structures that allow them to choose. The second part describes and analyses the experience, principally through the case-study of two students who wrote and critiqued their own Metaphysical poems. The paper concludes that a creative option works best when it becomes the process via which students acquire greater knowledge of theoretical issues.

Keywords: creative writing, assessment, form, Metaphysical poetry

In this brief essay, I would like to explain how using a creative option in a module in an English Studies MA functions. In this case, English is certainly the language of instruction but not usually the students' mother-tongue. I will begin with some broad remarks on creative writing and assessment, the Spanish university system, and the modules in which I have used this option. This will be followed by an examination of students' work, leading to some modest conclusions.

Creative writing has expanded in recent decades in English-speaking countries, spearheaded by the highly successful programme run by the University of East Anglia and crowned in 2017 by the awarding of the Nobel Prize of Literature to one of its former graduates, Kazuo Ishiguro. Perhaps his achievement has resulted in our forgetting the names and success of a considerable number of writers, such as Tracy Chevalier, Anne Enright, Ian McEwan, or Rose Tremain. To select the most famous novelists perhaps acts as a disservice to the programme, as many successful script writers, as well as children's authors, have also studied there. In the field of creative writing, recent developments include, for example, online courses in novel writing. One of our long-standing Erasmus partners, Roehampton University, has for some

years no longer had an English Department but a Department of English and Creative Writing. Across the Atlantic, in the USA or Canada, we would see a similar pattern; in short, in the humanities, creative writing has become a thriving discipline.

Spain was a signatory to the Bologna Declaration (1999), which proposed radical reforms to tertiary education by offering wider opportunities across Europe. This implied, for example, modifying Spain's traditional reliance on five-year degrees. In many European states, the declaration has led to the implantation of a three-year 180-credit Bachelor Degree topped by a two-year, more specialized, 120-credit MA. Spain, nevertheless, for reasons which lie outside the scope of this paper, went down another path, opting for a 240 + 60 credit system. In the early days of the current century, the university authorities laid great emphasis on creativity and innovation: MA's should be adventurous, specialized, and attractive. This initial suggestion, whether naïve or completely illusory, never materialized in the intended form, partly because, in the end, the predominant indicator for the failure or success of a programme boiled down to whether it attracted enough students, and secondly, because the Spanish system maintained two—or arguably two-and-a-half—of the three reasons that European institutions had envisaged as being major obstacles to its integration into the EHEA, as we shall now see.

It was considered unfair, if not absurd, that a student had to wait five years for any formal recognition of having studied anything. A four-year degree has partly remedied that. However, two other features have certainly not, in the opinion of the author, ever been seriously tackled. In the first place, the huge number of compulsory subjects in any degree; second, an excess of subjects the contents of which are determined by the Ministry of Education. In the study-plan previous to the current one, in our university at least, this produced a curious situation in which there were two forms of institutionalized compulsion: that of the state, that of the university. It is important to point out, therefore, that the desire to oblige comes from both sources, and consequently, if in this area alone, both universities and the state share common beliefs.

What are the consequences, then, of the desire to impose? I will cite two examples. Recently, the author has been involved in the possibility of our department

joining a joint master's degree in English and American studies (JDEAS) coordinated by the University of Graz. A Spanish institution immediately places itself at odds with the majority of European countries because its structure differs, but that obstacle can be overcome. Nevertheless, on a more cultural or anecdotal level, the Spanish university system cannot translate into its own language (and system) a tripartite configuration based on compulsory subjects, restricted electives (on a certain tendency), and open electives, i.e. complete free choice. The university system and state accreditation cannot handle this: everything has to be translated into its own binary language: either obligatory or optional. This glaringly opposes the Bologna principle of translatability. The second result of such imposition reveals that the Spanish university system—throughout all its autonomous regions—has no desire to allow its faculty or students to exercise freedom in how degrees are designed and how students might be offered choice. The old principle of university autonomy, universities exercise meaningful independence from the state, might exist as a belief, but, in the end, it is redundant, because institutionally the university, at all levels, despite all its rhetoric to the contrary, has scarce interest in freedom and competition. Even this university's pride offering in the humanities, that it provides plenty of specialized, optional courses to its final-year students (the staff therefore have liberty in designing these courses) is very much the exception not the rule, and does not, by any means, receive the same enthusiasm amongst the administration as amongst its practitioners and beneficiaries. In short, the last paragraphs could be summarized simply: the Spanish university system and creativity lie at opposite ends of the spectrum.

One essential question that has to be addressed is assessment: how can creativity be evaluated? This thorny issue presents two separate problems, the first is epistemological, which I will now address, and the other, more practical, which I will deal with later. The Spanish Minister for Education, Pilar del Castillo (2000-2004), was once questioned about the extensive use of assessment in all fields of educational life, to which she replied that we live in a culture of assessment. Whatever political views one might have, it is hard to disagree with this statement. The Bologna process certainly accelerated continuous assessment in institutions where its presence was not yet felt, subsequently the old system of lectures, rounded off with a final exam at the

end of the semester or academic year, has well and truly been confined to history. Yet all aspects of academic life have been itemized, and therefore yield to some kind of judgement or another. Subjects contain numerous deadlines and exercises; not only is a student's work judged, but their attendance is potentially another activity which determines grades. A course syllabus no longer restricts itself to outlining a limited number of objectives: it has extended into a longish list of competences which will, hopefully, be successfully acquired. We therefore witness a strange educational paradox, where a relentless emphasis on holistic learning will be achieved through atomization in every walk of life. The Minister's insistence on 'culture' seems justified, as it seems to be not simply the culture of the Enlightenment, but its etymological, biological ancestor, which breeds new forms of clonal or semi-clonal life-forms which threaten to overrun the universe.

I have used the creative option on several occasions in the final year of undergraduate study in optional subjects, and more consistently at MA level. At this stage, the students' knowledge of English, if coupled with determination and inspiration, should produce, however imperfect, a competent literary text. The students' literary inspiration might always have existed, but perhaps not accompanied by proficient writing skills. Or, more idealistically, the creative process has motivated and improved writing skills. In addition, at this point, their appreciation of Literature will be at its highest, however irregular or patchy it might be. At MA level, a creative option also appeals to native-speakers, who usually make up a quarter or more of the intake. By stating it is an option, I would stress that students are not obliged to follow this path, the alternative being to write a more traditional academic term-paper. Indeed, some students have begun with a decent proposal, but have found the task so demanding that they have switched back to a form of writing with which they are far more familiar. Generally, about 25% of the group take the creative option, occasionally up to a half, and in one instance, nobody at all. This happened with one of the best cohorts, 2017-18: nobody volunteered to be a trench poet, not even for a while.

There are two fundamental pillars on which the exercise is built: *imitatio* and critical assessment. Imitating the old masters is a venerable tradition in certain disciplines, but not so much in contemporary Literature where, as Michel Foucault so

clearly identified, the author function, hence that which is distinctive, defines literary merit. TS Eliot's well-known essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1921) had previously elaborated on that very subject, denoting that strong animosity to Romanticism which he shared with other New Critics, as well as the uniqueness, or singularity, if you prefer, of Literature. Certainly, equivalents such as the common musical formula, 'Variations on a theme by...', or contemporary composers maintaining highly traditional forms, for example James MacMillan's *Stabat Mater* (2016), would rightly be deemed rarities in the Literature of the modern age. Detective fiction and neo-Victorianism are certainly derivative, which presumably accounts for their relatively low standing, academically speaking. Consequently, in spite of the difficulties that prosody present to students, a course where *imitatio* plays a major role in its specific Literature, or when writers show a particular interest in the past, provide the student with a convincing pedagogical reason for basing their creative powers on a text that has not been divinely inspired by a fountain of creativity or whose author has not been touched with heavenly coals.

This explains why the creative option worked particularly well with a course on the Renaissance. Another successful occasion was an undergraduate course on Irish Literature in which Joyce figured prominently. There are few texts as blatantly unoriginal and manipulated—to great effect—as the hell-fire sermon in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In that instance, and in the case of Victorian Literature, some ground had been prepared by particular attention to rhetoric. Students were asked, the case of Dickens cries out for such analysis, to identify figures from asyndeton down to zeugma, with many others lying in-between. Initially, this might seem an outdated exercise, but in my experience, it has been widely accepted, partly because students rarely come across a class in which the emphasis lies on how something is represented rather than what that representation supposedly means. In short, it is a novelty, above all in poetry, where most students often have no clue about verse forms, which surely falls little short of bizarre.

Finally, Joyce, poetry: it all sounds terribly ambitious, doesn't it? Not necessarily, as basically what is required of students is that they imitate or base their creativity on existing texts; if they acquire some inkling of their mechanics, then

hopefully this will inspire them to create. At the same time, our knowledge of an individual student's capability limits itself to their production of rather formulaic answers to a set of questions on texts that differ—somewhere between slightly and moderately—each year. We have little knowledge of what their creative aspirations are, nor how they will respond to a challenge, as if there is no challenge, there might well be no takers. Their abilities should never be underestimated.

The final issue tackled before we analyse practical examples is assessment. Outside mathematics and its siblings, academic procedure involves the interpreting of data, whether these are figures for economic growth, past weather patterns in order to forecast tomorrow's, or electoral opinion polls, and so on. I have chosen three examples not at random but as examples of disciplines that follow the protocols of science while having attached to them the stigma of being woefully inaccurate. If that is the case, how can one reasonably assess a creative exercise in the twenty-first century? When rhetoric was a scholastic discipline, this would have presented no problem, but in our day and age, with such emphasis on personal development, it seems a well-nigh impossible task to fulfil in a manner that can be justified. How do you mark a poem?

Two answers present themselves. First, as stated previously, not only is the creative option voluntary, but some students start but later revert to more standard academic praxis, so those who complete the exercise are, by their nature, highly motivated: a good guarantee of high standards. Second, students are requested to accompany their work with additional items. In all cases, they are asked to write a critical assessment of their work following the theories that have been discussed in class. For example, if the subject were the nineteenth-century novel, and if Raymond Williams has figured largely in our analysis, a student could approach their text from a Marxist angle. If they have become more concerned with madwomen in the attic, then a feminist viewpoint would provide another valid strategy. In the same course, students were asked to provide the opening pages of a three-decker while sketching out how the characters and topics were developed in later chapters. This requires, or rather reveals, knowledge of Victorian life and its concerns. In the case of the Renaissance poem, the exercise required the poet's explanation of what was trying to

be communicated, what poetics had been used, in short, a brief technical report. In these situations, the student-artist demonstrates not only their creative ability but precisely those same skills that a more traditional academic exercise tests. For example, in the case of a poem, the ability to explain how one's own metaphors function reveals the extent to which the student understands their intricacies. The context will be different, a student's own work rather than Andrew Marvell, but the knowledge differs minutely. Likewise, if a student explains how the topic of adultery will be developed in their own neo-Victorian novel, this will only convince the instructor if they show they are aware of adultery's importance in fiction. Again, they will not be writing *Madame Bovary*, but however crude the mechanics of their writing, the instructor will have a clear picture of their comprehension of this ever-present plot device. These glosses, meta- and para-textual devices, complement the creative process, while giving, or rounding off would be a more appropriate term, a complete picture of the student's ability. I would claim therefore, that combination of these two strategies moves us much closer than it would initially seem to that much touted aspiration, 'holistic'.

The Victorian exercise was overall a great achievement but had one major drawback: enticed by lengthy Victorian novels, some students wrote vast passages of prose, in one case reaching forty pages. However commendable that might appear, it defeated the purpose of the exercise by obliging the student to spend several weeks for what would, in the end, make up one part of one exercise of one subject. As this was not the case of one student alone but of several, a stricter limit would have to be imposed in the future.

The two examples I will examine in some detail come from a course on Renaissance Literature, and specifically a module on Metaphysical poetry. Clearly, if the idea of 'a challenge' lies at the heart of the matter, this poetical mode receives pride of place for the following reasons. Many students stick to the contemporary; poetry has become the least liked genre among students—and some would say staff, too. Of all periods of poetry, excepting perhaps Romanticism as exemplified by the poetry of Percy Shelley and Samuel Coleridge for example, and Modernism, none is so heavily underscored by the persistence of the intellect in both form and content. Only

a student who has a good grasp of the nature of a Metaphysical conceit will successfully complete the task. To remind ourselves, a conceit in this instance takes the form of an analogy between two dissimilar items that the poet strives to bring together. The greater the initial disparity, the more outlandish the comparison, the more accomplished the conceit will become.

The first example comes from Gabriela Gonzalez, who wrote the poem 'Dew':

Dew

Love, what is love?
But me a drop—in you!

Where else but on a leafy altar made for dew
Can my sacrifice be true?

Drink, thy wine,
Not red. But clear, divine

Run me through your foamy vine
Make me your brine
for all time!

Let me mark you as I should
for you're the only form
that could, truly blissfully be
by drinking me.

Hopefully, the centred formatting of the text conveys the principle attention to form: we are reading a shape poem in which the lines imitate the form of the object they describe, in this case a drop. In class, we had previously looked at two of the most famous examples of this technique, George Herbert's 'The Altar', and 'Easter Wings'. In the words of the author, "[t]he conceits used in this poem are all very simple parallels drawn to strong notions that readers can relate to; love, religious sacrifice, cleansing one's soul from sin, and on death rejoining one's creator; all very human ideas we do not associate with objects of nature". Such a comment shows, with great clarity, that the student has acquired certain knowledge that Metaphysical poetry reflects the common concerns of its readers; in short, this is not poetry solely of and for the aristocratic and intellectual elite but of a much wider section of the public. Gabriela's conceits cannot be considered anything but ambitious; following on from the last quotation, she states her aims: "all very human ideas we do not associate with objects

of nature. Through parallel, this poem is able to convey the vigour earthly objects have to one another by using our own conventional ideologies of love, religion, and destiny”.

The motif of nature runs throughout this poem, due to Gabriela’s interest in eco-poetics, as argued in Jonathan Bate’s classic study of English poetry and landscape, *The Song of the Earth* (2000). The extent to which one judges the success of this lyric depends not solely on a close reading of the same but whether we also accept the poet’s explanation, for example:

In the first stanza, the poem invites us to define love as we see it, but quickly contorts our notion of love and brings it back to nature. Love is certainly cohesion between two sentient beings, ‘me–in you,’ the speaker asserts. Yet, raindrops and leaves are objects associated with landscape poetry. Landscape poetry is like gardening, in that it creates artificial landscapes to gaze at. For example, natural objects become adjectives or metaphors of human features (ex. apple of my eye), but the reader does not fuse with nature (Bate 11-12). This poem, however, gives the droplet an active voice, and it in turn declares its desire for union with a leaf.

In my judgement, the justification reads well, as it replicates much of the discourse so common in Metaphysical poetry, such as the nature of love, the ambivalence or categorical slipperiness of gardens as nature, artifice, metaphor, synecdoche, and so on. I would also point out that, in true Metaphysical fashion, the poem questions, if not deconstructs, some of its basic premises through the recurrent motif of nature versus artefact. The final declaration represents a fine example of what this school of poetry prides itself in: the bringing-together of contraries in an exercise of intellectual bravado: the droplet “declares its desire for union with a leaf”. If the reader harps on at the seemingly impossible behaviour of the droplet, then they have not understood the nature of a metaphysical conceit to the same level as Gabriela. It is precisely extravagance, think of John Donne and the compass, that encompasses late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century images.

The second example, by Paula Yurss, roots its homage to *imitatio* by placing her own work alongside its originator:

Henry King, 'Sic Vita'

Like to the falling of a star.
Or as the flights of eagles are,
Or like the fresh spring's gaudy hue,
Or silver drops of morning dew,
Or like a wind that chafes the flood,
Or bubbles which on water stood:
Even such is man, whose borrowed light
Is straight called in, and paid to night.
The wind blows out, the bubble dies;
The spring entombed in autumn lies;
The dew dries up, the star is shot;
The flight is past, and man forgot

Paula Yurss, 'Ruit Hora'

Like to the battery of your phone,
Or to a short time spent alone,
Or to the fuel tank of a car,
Or like smoking a good cigar,
Or the deadline of the thesis,
Or the youth on people's faces,
Even such is life, whose running time
Goes by, as fast as this short line.
The fuel runs out; the battery runs down;
The cigar ends; you go back to town;
The wrinkles on a face now shows,
The deadline's done, and time overflows.

If one is put off by the recurrent appearance of the mobile phone and its batteries, it would be a trifle hasty to dismiss the effort as merely trendy, as such devices surely correspond not only to modernity but also to the way time is currently assimilated and identified in much the same way as our seventeenth-century forebears used tapers, the seasons, or vegetable love.

Paula's awareness of the intricacies of poetical form is illustrated by a series of comments in the accompanying clarification. She explains the poem's rhyme scheme, the use of anaphora, the subsequent acceleration of rhythm, the use of short lines and words, the relationship of imagery to time, the replacement of natural objects in the original corresponding to the early modern period with manmade items in her twenty-first century version, by which date they have become the usual reference points for our existence. Furthermore, she argues that their artificiality, their rootedness in urban

life, gives the poem a greater sense of the rush of time and life's fragility than Henry King could have envisaged. Contrariwise, natural objects have the habit of both dying and renewing themselves.

The explanation of the poem's dialectics reads convincingly too. Let me cite one example. In the last-but-one line, the poet mentions "wrinkles", which might seem a little odd as wrinkles are more appropriate for the addressee or reader of the poem, that is someone near the end of their academic career, than for an aspiring student who had not even begun hers:

Finally, the wrinkle on somebody's face may seem the less violent of all the metaphors used. However, I have used it to refer to how we are concerned with our personal image and we put an emphasis on beauty and 'youth'. This was also a common reflection in the seventeenth century, and I have tried to move it to nowadays. I think that the idea of *vanitas* fits today's society perfectly.

Again, the student has shown that she has well understood the central anxieties of this poetical sub-genre, not simply as regards its representation, but equally its poetical language, illustrated in her awareness that images often strive to be violent.

In drawing some pertinent conclusions, I would first develop this line of argument. One major claim I make, based not exclusively on the evidence from these two poems, is that (motivated) students are immensely interested in questions of form, perhaps because they have rarely had occasion to pay attention to such matters while being subjected to endless questions on a text's supposed 'significance' or 'relevance' to social matters. A student in a Victorian literature course put this succinctly when explaining how he had written the first chapter of his novel: "As the story developed, I became aware that different conventions from other subgenres were gradually making their way into the narration". In this instance, the chapter was an adaptation of the 1860s Sensation Novel, exemplified by the work of Elizabeth Braddon, Wilkie Collins and company. Amongst these conventions were the use of dialect, the student attempted to write Scots dialogue, the narration of sexual assault (we had been reading Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*), the use of folklore in harness with realism, the influence of adventure stories, the role of the Gothic, amongst many others.

The natural reaction to such observations, might run along the lines of: “Well, that’s Ok, fine interesting; but you’re only concentrating on the work of some good if not exceptional students”. That misses the point. What I am trying to argue is that if the work is exceptional, and I believe it is undoubtedly so, it is because it has come to be so through the creative process, hence the student’s comment, “As the story developed (...)”. In other words, the creative process has become the way through which the student acknowledges, consciously or unconsciously, that the more theoretical or abstract ideas explained and debated in seminars have left off being theoretical and have become meaningful in a way that was unimaginable beforehand. I can think of no greater justification for using the creative approach than this, despite all the various obstacles it might place in our path. Besides, I am sure it gives both students and instructors greater pleasure than standard academic practice.

Note

I would like to thank Gabriela González and Paula Yurss for allowing me to cite from their work. I wish them all the best in their future life as poets or whichever profession they follow. I was unable to contact the person mentioned in the last paragraph.

SARA MARTÍN ALEGRE. CLOSE READING: THE PROBLEM OF THE LONG TEXT

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Sara.Martin@uab.cat

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ABSTRACT: Close reading is the foundation on which the Anglo-American pedagogy to teach English Literature rests. It remained the undisputed reigning method between 1940 and 2000, when the concept of ‘distant reading’ based on computer technology first appeared. Indeed, today academic debate is focused on whether ‘distant reading’ can co-opt ‘close reading’. However, other aspects are neglected: how we actually use this popular method in the classroom and whether it applies to all national traditions. Here, I question its applicability to the Spanish context, for it does not distinguish between lectures and seminars. Also, I describe the technical problems arising from applying ‘close reading’, developed to study poetry, to long texts: novels and novel series. Whereas ‘close reading’ has managed to overcome the initial excessive attention to the text at the expense of the context, we are failing to strike a good balance between the transmission of information about the literary text, typical of traditional lecturing, and intensive classroom close reading, with neither being fully successful.

Keywords: close reading, novels, teaching Literature, English Studies

In the Department of English here at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, we use a pedagogy based on close reading combined with contextual comment to teach literary texts, as happens in all English Departments in the world influenced by Anglo-American styles of teaching Literature. However, I am growing anxious this academic year about the limits of this methodology and how it actually works in our context, both for teachers and students.

Close reading, let’s recall, is a teaching methodology based on exploring the actual texts by paying minute attention to their detail; ideally, it should lead to interactive classroom discussion between teacher and students in small groups. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out, “The practice has multiple ancestors, including classical rhetorical analysis, biblical exegesis, and legal interpretation, and it also has some cousins, such as iconology and psychoanalysis” (2016: 58). Indeed, close reading started as reading practice in religious education, such as Sunday schools, before it was

transferred to self-education (both personal and organized by workers' associations), and the new classrooms of compulsory primary education in late Victorian times.

In this history, Jesse Corden Selbin highlights how, among others, publisher John Cassell and art critic John Ruskin extended the Victorian idea of self-improvement through close reading to the booming popular press. These two eminent Victorians

advocated the democratization of critical reading skills and sought to foster a thick public reading culture. (...) Both drew upon established Protestant reading practices but parlayed them into a reformist logic that conscripted reading as a central practice of good citizenship—not just personally formative, but politically and socially instrumental. (Selbin 2016: 496)

According to Selbin, “while Cassell’s methods contributed to national educational reform, Ruskin’s charted a path to close reading as it is usually practiced in the wake of post-structuralism, emphasizing a textual fecundity that affords the proliferation of heterogeneous readings and interpretations” (497).

The university, nonetheless, was the last to benefit from close reading. “Prior to the mid-1940s”, Jay Jin explains, “the phrase ‘close reading’ is most commonly found in discussions of primary, secondary, and early college education, and not of graduate studies, the New Critics, or professional academia in general” (2017: 109). This formalistic approach was developed both in the UK and in the USA in the early 20th century to replace an older European philology-oriented methodology. As Smith clarifies, before New Criticism,

in the first quarter of the century, the study of literature consisted largely of the production, transmission, and acquisition of facts about sets of texts. What one established as a scholar, imparted as a teacher, and learned as a student were commonly the names of historically important authors and some basic facts about their lives; the titles, publication dates, and sources—especially classical—of their major works; relations of influence among them; and the readily observable features that distinguished forms, styles, and genres (the medieval romance, the Petrarchan sonnet, the Jacobean drama, and so forth). (60)

Thus, as an underground student I took a year-long ‘traditional’ course on 18th and 19th century Spanish Literature, consisting exclusively of lectures about approximately twenty set texts. We were expected to read them all but we never carried any books to class, nor discussed them in any way with the teacher. This kind of ‘lección magistral’ aimed at very large classes is the equivalent of the Anglo-American lecture,

which is then combined with the seminar, a type of undergrad teaching we don't have a tradition for in Spain. In most English Studies Departments in Spain we do use, then, the seminar format but applied to large groups, ranging from 20 students in the elective courses to 90 in some compulsory core courses—which does sound quite absurd.

What is, I believe, even more absurd is that today the academic work on 'close reading' is not really discussing its classroom applicability but the attempts to replace it with so-called 'distant reading'. This is an alternative approach to the literary text, defended among others by Franco Moretti, basically devoted to a most extreme worship of its formal properties, which is stripped down to its roots by using computer technology. In his essay "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000), Moretti maintained that:

we know how to read texts, now let's learn how not to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, 'Less is more'. (quoted in Smith: 64)

I completely disagree that the disappearance of the text is justifiable in any way. I agree, rather, with Smith that "'Close reading' makes a neat contrast to 'distant reading', but not a pertinent one for promoting the value of computational methods for literary studies" (2016: 70), much less in the classroom. As I do, she defends a pedagogy based on close reading complemented by observations that open up the text and embrace the context. This, I should say, is the most common method in English Literature classes in Spain.

However, since we have not really managed to convince students to read the books in advance and contribute their own passages for comment, I believe that what we do in class fails on both counts: it is never as informative as a lecture, nor as effective as seminar in-depth analysis. My own classes have become a very strange product: I read a passage, comment on it, and students make notes of what I say, as in a lecture, instead of contributing their own comments. Only a handful talk with me, which does not necessarily mean that they have read the text; they may just be

elaborating on the specific passage. The bigger the class, the less productive close reading is, even though common sense suggests that class discussion should be livelier with many participants. I need to add that I'm no longer sure about how close reading must combine with introductory lecturing, as it seems a waste of classroom time to transmit what can be easily found on the internet, especially when this is what we use for our own introductions. I won't even mention the nightmare of producing a nice-looking PowerPoint in as few hours as possible...

I do realize that I have never discussed with any of my colleagues how a text is prepared for class and how they handle it before the students; actually, I have never been trained as a teacher on that central aspect of my profession. So what do we actually do?

Basically, I do as a teacher what I did as a student: read the text once to get an overall impression, then again pencil in hand to locate what I call the 'hot spots'. During this second reading, I make very brief notes of the plot in each chapter, which is an extremely tedious business. I hate it so much that often I can't decipher my own handwriting. Then, whether this is legitimate or not I don't care, I borrow another summary (from Wikipedia, or study aids such as Gradesaver), and produce—only for my eyes—a kind of composite creature, merging my plot notes with these other notes as briefly as I can manage. Next, I add to the summary thus produced the page number of the main passages from the 'hot spots' and, obviously, I place small pieces of paper marking the most relevant pages in the book. It is very important that the notes I take to class are very clearly printed on the page so that I see at one glance the 'hot spots' that I want to discuss and the page references for the quotations. Funnily, although I usually select around ten passages, I never have time for more than six, yet I never manage to select only that number. Discussion inevitably leads to passages not marked and that are impossible to find in a hurry, which is a constant source of frustration.

How long does it take to work on a novel using close reading? Well, it's funny how a novel can be dealt with in a couple of sentences in a wider-ranging lecture—“Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* denounces that women married to abusive husbands in the 19th century lacked the protection of the law and were reduced to trusting the gentlemanly inclinations of good men”—but 'covered' only very partially

even in ten sessions of frantic close reading. For, here is the inevitable situation: what dictates the number of sessions are the needs of the syllabus and not the intensity of the text, which might require a year-long monographic course to really get to its core. Or surface, if you think of William Shakespeare or James Joyce.

On the other hand, we may be overdoing it. Because of a series of external accidents affecting my program this semester, such as a strike or even the course inauguration, I have been forced to compress my teaching into fewer sessions. Novels that should have been taught in seven sessions have been reduced to four. Hence, I've had to talk 'about' the text rather than read from it as extensively as I wanted to do. Strangely, this change is not so negative as I would have assumed because attention to textual detail often results in not having the chance to discuss larger issues in the text, from characters' narrative arcs to plot architecture. And it's great to be able to do that.

What is it like for a Literature teacher to prepare a novel for a series of close reading sessions, then? A time-consuming chore. Let's say, for the sake of argumentation, that a 300-page contemporary novel to be taught in 5 sessions takes 5 hours to read the first time, and 8 the second (pencil in hand, marking text, making notes). Add 3 hours to produce a summary, then, say, 3 more hours to check bibliography (download at least one article and read it, check at least 3 other sources). This is already 18 hours, plus, say 2 hours for the PowerPoint, if you're lucky, that's 20 hours for 5 sessions of 75 minutes each, 1.92 hours of preparation for each hour we teach, instead of the official 1.07 in my university. And this, of course, is just a silly figure, for to properly teach any novel, you need to have read many, many others novels, other Literature, and plenty of literary criticism... What I teach every session has taken, in fact, 33 years of my life to prepare, since the day I became an undergrad.

Time-consuming as preparing a novel for class is, I find it increasingly difficult to 'control' the text. No matter how often I have taught the text and how hard I have worked on the summary and the passage selection, it is more and more complicated to keep the whole novel 'fully available' in my mind. I attribute this to my own ageing but also to students' lack of participation in the process of dealing with the text.

To strengthen my grip on the text, then, in a few occasions I have transferred the selected quotations onto a Word document, projected onto the classroom screen.

With classics available online this type of document can be produced in a reasonable time, but with new books typing the selected quotations into your computer constitutes a waste of precious (research) time. A possibility is, of course, using both the paper copy and the ebook. Since we're trying to convince students to buy the set texts, however, I find that projecting a selection of quotations rather than reading from the print book is a self-defeating pedagogy. With quotations from secondary sources things are, I believe, different and I see no problem in just sharing a passage without bringing the whole book or article to class. But maybe I'm wrong.

These days in particular, I feel that the bottom is dropping out of my own pedagogy, for I am having trouble handling in class the bulky text of Suzanne Collins' trilogy *The Hunger Games*. Summarizing in the manner I have described book three, *Mockingbird*, selecting the passages for discussion and writing the class notes took me about three hours of a very busy morning. This is for a book I have read twice, which means that I was already using a copy with pencil markings and comments. After these three hours, however, and seeing that there was no way I could comment on so many aspects of the protagonist's (gender) characterization in just 75 minutes, I threw it all away (metaphorically speaking) and decided to focus on just the last chapter and the "Epilogue", using intensive close reading. And trust that the novel would be sufficiently 'covered' in one session (I'm using 7 for the whole trilogy, treating it as a single text, within a one-semester elective course on Gender Studies). In the end, I only had time to read three passages...

I am by no means sure that I can reach a conclusion and improve my own methodology. I certainly do not wish to simply read in class a written-down lecture as I very much prefer to use the time-honoured method of Socratic discussion with students, aided by close reading. I have even wondered whether the problem of close reading is technological since print books make it very difficult to improvise finding relevant passages, whereas ebooks appear to be more flexible. It has been simply my aim to start a debate about a key aspect of our methodology that we so often take for granted.

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**PAOLA NICOLÁS, IVANA BOYANSKA AND HELENA STYLE.
ENGLISH STUDIES: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE STUDENTS' POINT
OF VIEW**

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

paola.nicolas@e-campus.uab.cat

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ABSTRACT: In the following paper we, as fourth year students, give an insight of our experience as 'English Studies' students at UAB. Our main aim is to analyze the totality of the degree including its strengths and weaknesses. The objective is to make a contribution to the improvements which could be made in our degree, just to make the experience a more profitable and pleasant one. Our paper is divided into three different sections: Linguistics, Literature, and Culture. We mention some of the subjects in the curriculum suggesting how they could be approached in a more effective manner, that is to say, introducing new activities, the amount of homework set and other improvements. We firmly believe that what we defend in this paper is only going to benefit the students, the teachers and the experience as a whole, always from our absolute respect and thankfulness towards our teachers.

Keywords: English Studies, improvements, approach, students, learning

As fourth year students, we are about to finish our degree. Fortunately, we can firmly state that we have gone through a journey full of knowledge and experiences that have changed us forever. However, we keep wondering whether this is the case for the rest of the students. As future graduates, we will also have to keep the study of the Humanities alive and, most importantly, relevant in our society. Apart from teaching and learning content, the students and the teachers are the ones responsible for making this possible. Thus, this paper deals with our experience as students and suggests a few changes that could be introduced in order to make the experience of studying 'English Studies' even more enjoyable. Our ideas will be divided into three different branches, those being Linguistics, Literature, and Culture.

Linguistics

Firstly, when it comes to Linguistics we find that the compulsory subjects are, in general, all useful and necessary for our degree. We would like to highlight how the

students find that one of the most relevant ones is ‘Fonètica i Fonologia’,¹ since there is an overall impression that the students are extremely happy once they have finished it. On the other hand, we have one of the most challenging subjects in the degree, which is ‘Història de la Llengua Anglesa’. As it is a very dense and tricky subject, we believe that setting more practice homework to the students would help a lot. This way, students would get used to working with old texts more quickly and what is more, they would approach the exam more confidently.

Last but not least, we would like to briefly discuss the subjects which are offered in the first and second year, which are ‘Usos Bàsics de la Llengua Anglesa’ and ‘Ús de la Llengua Anglesa’. It is true that these subjects help the students increase their English level by learning idioms, complex grammar structures, new vocabulary and so on. Nevertheless, we wonder if this could not be done by offering other subjects in which the students had to read novels or articles while learning more content, related to our degree.

Other subjects that are one of the main concerns of students are the third-year subjects ‘Expressió Escrita Avançada’ and ‘Expressió Oral Avançada’. The overall impression after taking these subjects is that students do not consolidate techniques that the ‘Guia Docent’ mentions. What is more, almost all of us agree that the levels of writing and speaking that are expected from us after passing the subject are not realistic. For instance, in many cases students have obtained excellent results and, therefore, an excellent final mark. However, in other subjects in which academic writing is taken into account as well as oral skills, they have found themselves a bit lost and have obtained low marks because of the teachers’ expectations regarding their writing and oral skills. Thus, we claim that these two subjects are not really well designed for students to improve their academic writing or their oral skills. Obtaining good marks in ‘Expressió Escrita Avançada’ and ‘Expressió Oral Avançada’ is not a reliable proof that students actually have the level that is required in subsequent subjects of the degree.

¹ Please, note, that although here we’re using the official UAB titles of the courses in Catalan, all are taught in English.

About Linguistics, then, we truly believe that different class dynamics, when applicable, could ease students' learning. We have already witnessed examples of different class dynamics in 'Metodologia de l'Ensenyament', 'Lingüística Comparada' and 'Gramàtica Anglesa'. Tactics such as having an inverted class or making students prepare the material before going to class so as to discuss it all together have been received very positively by students. 'Anglès per Usos Específics' is yet another example of alternative lessons, in which the teacher does not have the traditional role of an authoritative figure in the classroom, but students get to be more involved in each activity and/or discussion. Having students seated in a circle is just a mere example of how different the process of learning is in this classroom.

Literature

Our second point deals with the other branch studied in our degree: Literature. We are pleased to say that we find the structure of the lessons very appealing. Most often, the lessons are based on a discussion between the students and the teacher in which we, as students, are invited to think and consider the different topics which appear in the novel or poem being discussed. We would like to highlight the fact that we think that it is essential that the students also take part in the Literature lessons in an active manner. By doing this, the lessons turn into a very enjoyable experience.

Despite this, we must also deal with one of the issues that Literature teachers find the most worrying: students do not read. For obvious reasons, the teacher cannot control whether their students have read the bibliography, mainly because students are adults and they are there by free choice. However, is there anything that can be done to make the reading experience more attractive? We thought of an exercise which could engage the students more in the reading experience. Once a novel discussion is finished, it would be interesting to compare the novel with a movie based on that work. In this exercise, students will have to find similarities and differences, how accurate is the representation of the characters... We believe that this would be a great help as watching films is an activity very much on trend these days. This could be done in some sessions (if there is enough time) or by a discussion in the forum, making that compulsory.

Finally, we would like to present a project dedicated to those students who love Literature and would like to take a step further. The creation of the Book Club is necessary in a degree in which we study Literature. It is an extracurricular activity in which the students simply have fun through reading books at the same time that they discuss other essential novels which are not studied in class, for time reasons. The Book Club should be created by the students and could be held on Friday morning as we do not have any lessons. However, the teachers would have to help a little bit by promoting it in their lessons so that we can create a reasonable group.

Another very common demand among students is including paper writing as well as oral presentations in Literature classes. We find that we learn much more by writing a paper rather than studying for an exam. Also, oral presentations make it easier for students to get more involved in the topic and to present their own view on what is being referred to in class.

Culture

Finally, our last point of discussion is concerned with the third branch of our degree, which comprises the Culture subjects. The courses we will discuss are first-year subject 'Història i Cultura de les Illes Britàniques' and second-year subject 'Història i Cultura dels Estats Units'. In general, students believe that both subjects are necessary to have a good understanding of the culture we further explore through the Literature subjects, and we agree that they are useful in order to contextualize the texts we will analyze later on in the course, apart from giving us a better understanding of the culture and language we are studying in our degree. We also think that the scope of the History studied in both subjects is insightful and relevant towards understanding the British and American communities.

In reference to the large amount of information imparted in the subject, although we find it very relevant, we also remember how hard it was to be able to remember most of it for the exams, and to be able to recall what we had learnt in future subjects. We did do many activities in both subjects that made the learning experience more enjoyable and we really think we benefitted from them. Those activities were oral presentations on a certain topic or historical character and the use

of forums that invited further inquiry about the time period we were studying. In some classes, the teachers often provided the students with additional texts which were very useful in further illustrating the way the people thought at the time. However, due to the massive amount of information we had to cover throughout the course, in some classes we did not manage to reach contemporary history and missed some crucial time periods or historical events.

As a solution to the problem of retaining all the information and not just having to memorize it for the exam, we suggest that we could introduce other ways of learning that have been used in other subjects or simply employ to a larger extent the activities we already did in both subjects. We suggest that a larger number of oral presentations and short papers are introduced throughout the courses, so that the students are encouraged to do some autonomous research on the time period studied, and which would also help develop important skills that are valuable in our degree, such as writing, listening and oral skills. Concerning the oral presentations, we think that maybe in every class one or two groups of two to three people could prepare a presentation on the matter in addition to the lecture given by the teacher. This way, the class becomes more dynamic and by having done previous research on the topic, it makes it more memorable. As for the short papers, we believe that writing a short text on a topic that additionally requires some research, also helps memorizing it. At this stage, we must point out that we did do some oral presentations, and because of how successful they were in terms of helping people actually remember what they worked on, we think that if this could be done more often it would be highly beneficial.

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