

Teaching the Reading of Texts: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Report of a Workshop held at the University of Glasgow on December 7th 2005

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As academics in the Humanities, we spend much of our time grappling with the meanings of texts which are often obscure, and, even, downright difficult. Texts, short and long, in their original language and in translation, play a central part in our academic practice – and in our teaching practice. How can students, many of whom have been taught to use books rather than to read texts, and many of whom will not be devoting their studies to a single discipline, become proficient in the interpretation and understanding of these demanding materials? The authors of this report, one a Historian, the other an English Literature specialist, felt it would be valuable to pursue these questions at an interdisciplinary level. We began the discussion last December by bringing together colleagues from the disciplines represented by three Subject Centres (English; History, Classics and Archaeology; Philosophy and Religious Studies) at a workshop held in Glasgow.

The day began with a ‘speed dating’ session in which participants, each assigned a partner from a different discipline, compared and contrasted their pedagogic approaches to two short texts specified in advance by the organisers. The rest of the event was structured around a series of short presentations, each of which stimulated detailed—and often impassioned—discussion.

A session on the topic of ‘Encouraging Students to Read’ began with an account by Keith Crome (Philosophy, Manchester Metropolitan) of the problems involved in teaching texts to Philosophy students. Catherine Steel (Classics, Glasgow) then introduced a Master’s level exercise—not quite a course—examining one text in considerable detail. After lunch, Margaret Connolly (English, St Andrew’s) discussed the problems of translated material. The day concluded with general reflections and discussion in a session led by David Jasper (Theology and Literature, Glasgow).

With such an all-embracing and important theme, it is unsurprising that discussions were wide-ranging—and therefore difficult to ‘capture’ in a brief report. What follows is an attempt to gather up some of the key points and concerns:

1. Keith Crome’s talk focused on the **place of texts** in Philosophy: while texts are self-evidently central to the disciplines of History, English and Classics, this is not necessarily the case for Philosophy lecturers and students. Dr Crome raised the awkward suggestion that being a philosopher might not involve engagement with texts at all, but rather be simply a process of mental exercise, followed by discussion—a common view in academic Philosophy with which his own recent project for the Philosophy and Religious Studies Subject Centre has taken issue.¹

2. A pressing consideration for those disciplines that do involve textual study is naturally the **cost and availability** of student texts. Here Literature students are at a considerable advantage. In the words of the tutor of a nineteenth-century literature course (quoted by Colin Brooks), Literature students can ‘buy the books for the price of a round of drinks’. The philosophical canon is available in print, increasingly so online, as is a wide range of literary and historical texts. The same is true for the texts

used by classicists, though here the position is complicated by the question of translation. One problem with online texts is the issue of authority. Whilst the editions used in big subscription-only services such as ECCO (Eighteenth Century Collections Online (<http://www.gale.com/EighteenthCentury/>)) are generally specified and scholarly standards high, many free e-texts are of very poor quality.²

3. Closely linked to the questions of cost and availability is the issue (the problem) of getting students to read **long texts**. Often in HE, what might be called 'archival integrity' is breached and extracts easily become the order of the day. 'Readers', the characteristic mode of bringing the primary sources to the student, some participants felt, compromised any engagement with a text unless the editor was extremely painstaking and extremely sensitive.

But the question of the 'long text' is not simply a matter of its cost or format. Student circumstances are changing rapidly: what might physically be involved for a student struggling to bring in money through part-time work in engagement with a long text? How do students find time to deal with, say, *Middlemarch* or Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*? What advice are they given as to appropriate divisions of the text? The meeting heard about an English Literature module in which students were asked to read no more than selected chapters of a Victorian novel. Specialists in other disciplines were shocked by this, feeling that one did not have to believe in the notion of a definitive text to accept that such reduction would significantly alter the student's experience of the text for the worse. Yet reading abridgements and bite-sized chunks simply replicates the experience of many readers of the past: the readers of the abridgements of *Robinson Crusoe* and other classics, for example, or of serialised Victorian novels.

4. Debate about the **choice of texts** is longstanding. To understand a culture, participants felt, we should not only understand the canon (the great books of literature have their parallels in the great crises and turning points—or is it the great essay topics?—for historians), but also grapple with the emergent canon (emergence being in our hands), and with that material (detritus?) which has been obstinately refused promotion.³ Electronic resources now make it much easier to confront students with obscure—even completely unknown—texts, sidestepping the decisions of hard-copy publishers. Is this state of affairs an uncomplicatedly good thing, or is the challenge to the canon it implicitly involves in any way problematic? The question of canon has been a favourite of literary scholars and students; it deserves more attention from historians and from those responsible for setting examination papers. E.H.Carr famously dismissed the detritus of History by claiming that the history of Cricket would not be cluttered up by those 'who made ducks and were left out of the side'.⁴

5. For some disciplines, the question of which particular version of a text is given to a student is crucial, and needs to be coupled with an awareness of the existence of **different versions of the 'same' text**. That is an obvious enough point with respect, for example, to *The Prelude*. Historians have been less sensitive to such issues.⁵ It could be, and often is, argued that no texts are actually completely 'singular' or 'definitive'. As some participants pointed out, the process of textual making can be as significant—the discarded preliminaries as revealing—as the apparent 'end' product. Equally, the 'original' text is on many occasions lost to us. David Jasper reminded us of how outstandingly true that was for the Christian Bible. The same holds true for much of the material used by historians: the notes of statements in legal cases, parliamentary diaries recording the speeches of other MPs and so on.

The emergent discipline of 'History of the Book', increasingly important in English Studies courses, is centrally concerned with these topics and in many institutions is involving undergraduates in activities closer to postgraduate research than to the traditional undergraduate essay—a development that has been greatly accelerated by the availability of facsimile online texts such as those included in EEB0 (Early English Books Online (<http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>)). For both students and lecturers, electronic presentation offers the chance for a multiplicity of texts to be encountered and drawn upon: discarded material can be revealed, as in the x-ray of a painting. There are many pedagogical possibilities here that remain under-exploited in our disciplines.⁶

6. How can we best help students become **confident readers**? Studying texts as part of a degree programme almost by definition will mean that students learn to view texts through disciplinary prisms. But what relationship should this bear to what we might think of as first-level undergraduates' 'naïve', 'innocent'—'pre-disciplinary' reading? (Or, is this the wrong way to put things? Some participants argued that there are no innocent readers, nor, for many texts (e.g., The Bible) any neutral readers.) What benefits do a supposedly disciplinary reading bring to the table? And how might 'interdisciplinary' reading work for (or threaten the disciplinary development of) our students? How does a History student combine the study of text with the study of historical narrative? More generally, what approach can best engender confidence in students, giving them a sense that they can engage with the text on equal terms not only with the tutor but also with the 'authorities'? Direct engagement with a text, after all, some said, takes away faculty authority. How can that be productively and not suffocatingly restored and maintained? Margaret Connolly insisted that level one and Master's level provided the moments of disablement, the still awkward transitions often destroying student confidence (not least in calling into question the value of recently acquired, and hard-won, qualifications). The Scottish four-year degree system, it was suggested, brought benefits in terms of growing confidence over the longer period of time. Was that four-year structure a 'luxury'? The parallel provided by the Irish structure (a Scottish system 'squeezed' into three years/levels) was noted. The implications of structure and length for types of understanding and cognitive development would make an interesting and important theme for a further meeting.

7. Close reading of set texts is—or can be—important to all the disciplines represented at the meeting. Yet it is a fact that the over-crowded curriculum has reduced the possibility for sustained close reading, with one week's work rapidly giving way to the next. One way in which faculty can check on students' learning is through asking their library for a print-out of books (from the module reading list) which have been unsuccessfully searched for over the duration of the module. Colin Brooks's experience has been that the great majority of such books are sought solely within or very shortly after the specific week involved. Once the moment has passed, it is never reclaimed. Thus, for example, the twenty students taking the *American Revolution* module seek Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (four copies in the library); by mid-way through the following week, *Common Sense* is forgotten and attention has instead turned to searching for *The Federalist* papers. Not least, faculty will probably be surprised at the student preferences thus revealed.

Against the rapid tour model, the benefits of sustained engagement were insisted upon. Participants agreed that it would be appropriate and necessary to read a passage, if not a whole text, aloud in class—and to re-read it. The issue of training in reading aloud, and the benefits thereof, excited a number of interesting comments. Silent reading is, after all, a relatively recent, even a strange, practice. It was pointed

out that George Ross (Subject Centre for Philosophy and Religious Studies) had urged the deployment of advanced undergraduate mentors for level one and two students and that their work might involve joint reading. The benefits of 'autonomous learning groups' meeting in advance of formal sessions—something that is being taken up by an increasing number of English departments—were generally recognized: some felt, however, that faculty encouragement probably outran student enthusiasm.⁷

Catherine Steel, speaking of a Classics Master's level reading module (not yet credit bearing), argued for the benefits of engaging with a relatively short text and in great detail. Such engagement might come before acquiring formal linguistic competence; engagement, the moral of her practice had been, provokes and fosters linguistic competence. That module, based upon a single text, available in an edition with a copious critical apparatus, raised questions of the student's ability not only to come to terms with the text, but also to extract the maximum leverage from the footnotes. Are students taught how to read, and then how to use, such notes and commentary? They loom large after all: Harold Jenkins's Arden *Hamlet* includes eleven pages of introductory editorial matter; one hundred and fifty nine pages of introduction; two hundred and fifty eight pages of text; and then one hundred and fifty further pages of longer notes. Within the text itself, each page consists of, on average, about 35% notes. Is coming to terms with such a presentation of a text essentially a graduate skill and accomplishment? The process of editing a text, too, has, some participants felt, much to commend it, not least as a token of employability, editing being so substantial a feature of Humanities' graduate occupations. While applauding the practice and the ambition of such a module as Catherine Steel's, however, the meeting noted with some regret that time, resources and the undergraduate curriculum would make it difficult to implement at BA level.

It was also argued that the chosen mode of assessment could be such as to provoke and require sustained close reading of a text. One method is the use of 'gobbets'—though it was recognized that the gobbet as text itself raises numerous problems. Here, in the assessment of a module requiring intensive study of texts, the meeting felt, was another topic worthy further discussion.

8. The meeting did not begin from any presupposition that students were currently less able than they had been in the past. Nevertheless, the consensus was that many level one students were not prepared for the '**critical**' reading presupposed by higher education. In part this was because of the surfeit of secondary material: of the 'casebook' type, for example, surrounding and stifling literary texts. Historians had recently heard that 'A' level boards, beginning with the good intention of having students engage with primary materials, had fallen away so sharply that examinees were now being asked to comment not on, say, Edwin Chadwick on Poor Law Reform, but on a Historian's opinion of Chadwick on Poor Law Reform. It was pointed out that secondary texts might at least produce a model for student writing and argument construction; against this was the argument that the door was thereby opened to plagiarism.

9. Margaret Connolly discussed the teaching of Old and Middle English literature, raising awkward and wide ranging questions of precision and authenticity in **translation** (including the question of sticking to poetry or 'retreating' into prose: there was general agreement that prose was more accessible, more familiar, to most students) and the pitfall of the apparently familiar word or phrase. With large student groups the level of linguistic understanding was often hard to measure; and reading aloud as a test for understanding, impractical. David Jasper urged that faculty should 'get behind the linguistic challenge'; that language was a barrier could be a

convenient excuse for student and tutor alike. Indeed, there was, some felt, a case for setting to one side (at least for the purposes of undergraduate education) any supposedly 'original' text: values, implications, resonances ought to be accessible through reading of any version of a text—an argument at odds with the topic of point 5 above. Cranmer, Professor Jasper pointed out, committed himself to translating the Bible anew at fairly regular intervals, as common language changed: only thus could the word of God be made available to the people. Against this, the loss of the opportunity to appreciate a text as a product of a particular moment was registered (even as the complexity of establishing what constituted 'a particular moment' was acknowledged).

These and other topics will form the basis for future events and perhaps also of other types of collaboration between Humanities Subject Centres. This is an area which comes close to the heart of what we believe we are doing as teachers (and researchers), and talking about it raises challenging questions:

* Are we in the business of providing certification ('learn and forget') or the tools for lifelong learning ('read and reread', 'think and rethink', 'write and revise')? The reading skills of the citizen, the common reader and the professional might be very different; but are they necessarily so? Ought the armoury of reading skills be common?

* How should we deal with the loss of control many lecturers report in students' direct engagement with texts? Faculty try to fill the breach with yet longer reading lists—clearly not an adequate solution.

* What will be the place of electronic texts (and electronic textual analysis) in our disciplines? Are they simply tools or will they radically reshape the nature of what we do?

* How does 'interdisciplinary' reading work in the Humanities at seminar, course and programme level? What are the factors, both institutional and disciplinary, that inhibit and enable such work?⁸ Should we be more open with students about the different approaches characteristic of different disciplines?

* In his talk, David Jasper worried that lecturers were currently deploying a pedagogy appropriate to a previous generation—in terms both of cultural familiarity⁹ and of resources. Is there a generation gap of this kind, and how should it be bridged?

* What is the best way to assess student reading? Is the centrality of the essay to undergraduate work in the Humanities under threat from upstart forms such as learning journals, creative writing exercises and online quizzes? And, if so, is this a development to be welcomed?

* How can we acknowledge struggle, even more so failure, as a valued learning outcome? How can we assess an evolving process made up of intellectual understanding on the one hand¹⁰ and immediate visceral response on the other?

* Are our students being suffocated by scholarship? Does over-attention to the footnotes—and to the importance of bibliographical citation in student essays—threaten the enjoyment of texts and inhibit undergraduate response?

Through future meetings and initiatives, we hope to move closer to answers to some of these questions. If you would like to be involved in the planning of future events and projects on this topic, or would simply like to be kept up to date on what we are

planning, please contact either Colin Brooks at the Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology (c.brooks@arts.gla.ac.uk) or Jonathan Gibson at the English Subject Centre (jonathan.gibson@rhul.ac.uk). Our sincere thanks to the speakers and the participants at our meeting in Glasgow for providing us with so much to ponder and argue over.

¹ The report on the project, conducted jointly by Keith Crome and Mike Garfield, is available at http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/documents/articles/text-based_teaching_and_learning_a_report.html.

² See the 2004 Arts and Humanities Data Service report on this topic by Ylva Berglund *et al.* (<http://ahds.ac.uk/litlangling/ebooks/report/FreeEbooks.html>).

³ See M.Beard, *The Invention of Jane Harrison* (Harvard, 2000), for provocative comments on the status of a contemporary of Harrison's, Eugénie Strong.

⁴ E.H.Carr, *What is History?*, Pelican edn., 1961.

⁵ Cf. J.H.Hexter, 'Quoting the Commons, 1604-1642', in DeL.J.Guth and J.W.McKenna, eds., *Tudor Rule and Revolution* (Cambridge, 1982); the exchanges between Hexter and G.R.Elton in the *British Studies Monitor*, 2-3, 1971-2; and between J.S.Morrill and M.Janssen in *Parliamentary History* 15 (1996); and C.Brooks, 'Individuals, Parties and the Parliamentary Record in the 1690s', in *Parliaments, Estates and Representation* 16 (1996).

⁶ This is the topic of an ongoing English Subject Centre project (<http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/technology/tech20.php>).

⁷ More commonly, such groups focus on writing skills rather than reading skills (cf. the English Subject Centre project described at <http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/literacy/lit3.php>).

⁸ Related topics are currently being investigated across all disciplines by Neil Thew (Sussex) in research for the Higher Education Academy interdisciplinary group.

⁹ The problems of teaching and learning early modern religion will be the topic of a meeting to be held at the University of Manchester on November 17 2006. Details are available on the English Subject Centre website at http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/events/event_detail.php?event_index=146.

¹⁰ Steve Poole (History, University of the West of England) requires students on his module on British art in the 18th century to provide responses to a series of images as the module proceeds (how they understand the image); these responses can be modified for a period of ten days, but are then 'frozen'. At the end of the module, students are required to write about their changing understanding, using only those earlier responses as external material.