

IATL Academic Fellowship Final Report 2016
Censorship and Society
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Introduction - Activities

IATL's Academic Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to design, develop and convene my own module to undergraduate students across the university. Over the course of two years I harnessed relationships with academics in different disciplines and universities to create an interdisciplinary module centred around the broad and diverse problem of censorship. By viewing censorship as a problem that transcends disciplines, countries, time periods and cultures I hoped to create an inclusive environment that encouraged debate and peer-led learning.

The module sought to engage with questions such as:

- Why is literature banned or censored?
- Is censorship ever justified or realisable?
- Does censorship inhibit and impose a dictatorship? Who defines the moral values that govern society?
- How do standards of morality and immorality, obscenity and non-obscenity, differ widely from culture to culture?
- Can a system of censorship be established which will protect the moral values of a community without infringing upon freedom of expression?
- Can we ever obtain freedom of expression?

These questions served as a frame for discussions throughout the module, we continually returned to them. They helped to facilitate student analysis and understanding of the reading, and the creation of cross-disciplinary connections.

When combining interdisciplinary teaching, a diverse body of students, (including international students and students from different departments), I found that it became important to develop an interdisciplinary and international body of language to create shared understanding. I worked closely with the contributors to ensure that a universal classification and language is created, so that the module was accessible to all learners and an inclusive atmosphere is created. I was involved in the delivery of all sessions to ensure that time is allocated to forging links between all the disciplines, and the learning objectives are closely adhered to. By the end of the module I hoped learners developed their skills in interdisciplinary processes, as integrative system thinkers, independently inventing and validating - simultaneously "connecting the dots".

Outcomes

At the forefront of the design and development of my module was the question; how can I cultivate independent, self-directed learners capable of creativity and critique? I wanted my module to encourage students to challenge opinions and think critically, to move beyond what they might read in a textbook or hear in lectures. Inviting students to question not just what they were reading, the responses of their peers, but also their own thinking on certain topics. I adopted

a humanistic approach to ensure that all students engaged in their educational experience, I tried to connect all material to their everyday lives. Identifying the resonance and relevance of the materials supported interdisciplinary teaching and fostered philosophical discussions on questions of morality. At times, the focus on personalised engagement did create some challenges, which needed careful management. There was a tendency for certain members of the group to dominate with personal anecdotes, but I employed different methods to counter this. Additionally the learner-centred paradigm meant that I could trial experiential learning styles that focused on experience, inquiry and reflection.

Implications: Implementing Changes

Assessment

The module was assessed via alternative modes of assessment, which included a student conference where students were invited to work in small groups to create a paper presentation on a topic relating to censorship. Alongside this students were asked to submit a commentary on the experience of participating and helping to organise the student conference. The final assessment included a choice between a traditional academic essay and an edited collection of blog posts. I provided guidance for all assessments, particularly those that students were less familiar with. In light of the feedback I received and by working closely with Dr Nick Monk, it became apparent that for such assessments to work effectively it would be better to construct a marking scheme for each assessment, so that students could feel confident in their understanding of what they needed to do to achieve their desired result. Consequently, students might therefore be more likely to take risks with alternative forms of assessment, rather than sticking to the traditional essay and the familiar marking format. Additionally, it would also ensure that a second marker is privy to how I intend the assessments to be marked, without the need for explanatory meetings.

I have changed the percentage of the assessments to give a more substantial weighting to the student conference, which originally only contributed 20% to their final mark. The percentages are now:

- the commentary/creative project = 10%
- the presentation at the conference = 45%
- the edited collection/essay = 45%

I would like to propose that in addition to the option of writing a commentary on participating and helping to organise the student conference held at the end of the module, students could exchange this assessment for a creative commentary. This commentary should mimic the style of Shahriar Mandanipour's *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, where students use three typographical layers to tell a fictional/autofictional or autobiographical experience of censorship. For example, they could use a bold font for the story they want to tell, a plain font for the story they feel permitted to tell or the internal monologue that haunts their writing, and a crossed out font for what they think they cannot say. Many of the students struggled with the commentary and I learnt that all had experienced some form of censorship and wanted to discuss these personal experiences, this assessment will harness this and encourage them to think more critically to transform the meaning behind these experiences.

Censorship and Society has enabled me to make connections in a variety of departments across campus. One of these said collaborations created an opportunity to contribute to a research project. One of the potential outcomes of this project is the facilitation of Warwick students creating an informative video promoting digital awareness. Currently students have the opportunity to avoid alternative assessments by writing a traditional academic essay, I want to substitute this for a video project. This video should be accompanied by a commentary. The theme of the video project will be supported by around two sessions as part of the ten-week module, and should promote a reflection of e-safety and responsible digital citizenship. There will be considerable support and guidance available if students opt to undertake the video project, questions such as the following will be posed to help inspire the focus of their short video:

1. Explore the advantages and disadvantages of using social media.
2. Do social media platforms enable a rapid and global spread of harmful content?
3. Does the risk of digital wildfires necessitate new forms of social media governance? How do you propose social media should be governed?
4. Explore some examples of when social media has become harmful. Perhaps you might like to reflect on current/historical events, on your own experiences, or experiences of those you know.
5. How do you respond to the assertion that the internet "supports and encourages freedom of speech and therefore label any increased regulation as unethical"?
6. What impact does social media have on offline behaviour? Consider the effect of deindividuation in digital spaces.
7. Does preventing/delaying/monitoring the posting of content signify a barrier to freedom of speech?
8. Imagine you were creating a module for secondary schools on "Digital Maturity and Resilience", what would it include? How can we take care of our digital selves?
9. Imagine you were asked to draw a creative representation of a digital wildfire, what would it look like? Take a picture of your digital wildfire and write a creative story demonstrating the effect of digital wildfires.
10. "Establishing reasonable limits to legal freedoms of online speech is difficult because social media is a recent phenomenon, and digital social norms are not yet well established." Discuss.
11. Social media is no more vulnerable to rumours than any other form of communication. Discuss.
12. "The best response to bad speech is more speech... Online communities have a right to ostracize, call out, criticize bad actors." Discuss.
13. How is social media used to expose people who have behaved inappropriately? Examine some examples of digilantism in social media.
14. How we can govern social media - is technology part of the answer?

The video should be of two to four minutes in length, it should present a creative and critical reflection of their personal experiences, the aim is to create a resource that could be used to educate people of their age or younger about responsible use of the internet. The video should be accompanied by a short

commentary, which puts forward suggestions for an online handbook for a person of their age, providing guidance and suggestions for whether they feel social media should be governed and if so how. The concept is that students should create a fun and unique video that speaks to a person of their age, and garners further thought on pertinent issues pertaining to digital responsibility. The project goes to the heart of significant questions of censorship online, such as, will governance mechanisms limit freedom of speech? This question in particular generated considerable debate in class, and I hope this project will encourage students to examine the legal, moral, philosophical, and ethical dimensions that it raises in further detail.

As part of this project I am investigating the possibility of students having the opportunity to submit their video to a competition I am designing. I am exploring whether the nominated student for the best video might have the occasion to present it to the House of Lords or another platform created by the various stakeholders in the research project. It is my intention to investigate whether a workshop or presentation evening could be held to announce this, which students on the module could partake in.

In the first year of the module I secured a special guest lecture from Professor David Nutt, which was filmed and posted online. I have been lucky enough to secure Professor David Nutt's involvement for the second year running. I hope to begin advertising earlier to ensure an even greater turnout to the event.

Resources

I created a 'Teaching and Reading Materials' page where I uploaded all the reading materials for each week and the teaching resources used so that students could review it before and after the session to enable discussions to persist beyond the classroom. I also set up a blog that was only visible to students registered on the module, and this was also made visible to the various Warwick based contributors. I encouraged students to blog weekly and come along to a weekly workshop/office hour where I would offer feedback on their blog. There were some occasions when particularly conscientious students submitted the blog more than once, editing them after receiving feedback. Each week I would post a series of questions to inspire their blogs that stemmed from the reading and discussion during the session. It was challenging to get students to adopt this method of assessment, and I found that many left posting their blogs until just before the final deadline, thus they did not benefit from continual feedback throughout the module, or engaging in an online debate with their peers. I am developing ways of preventing this from occurring, however, I am reticent to create a precedent whereby students have to blog weekly, as I feel there will be some resistance to this, and I want students to have ownership over their learning outcomes. One option might be to reduce the word count, so that they are writing around 100 words weekly reflecting on their reading, this might also help to ensure that they engage with all the materials.

I set considerable reading materials for each week, and although I divided this up into compulsory primary and secondary reading, some students expressed that they found it intimidating or too extensive for a 15/12 CAT module. I want to

address whether some of the primary materials might be shifted into secondary, or whether it might visually help to create a sub-page for secondary reading materials, as sometimes just the visual list can be intimidating. The secondary reading materials are meant to serve as guidance for further reading to support independent research and assessments and are entirely optional.

Some of the students on the module conducted original research as part of their assessments, and this produced some astounding results. I want to cultivate this in the second year of the module, by highlighting opportunities for how the weekly topics might lend themselves to such research, and identifying how it might be analysed and incorporated into their assessments.

Feedback

Throughout the module I asked for student feedback and an engagement with the learning processes. I wanted students to take control of various aspects of the module, including, for example, the student conference. They were expected to contribute to the organisation and design of the day. It was difficult to organise, distribute the responsibilities, and monitor the progress of their individual contributions. Inevitably, some students had more time intensive responsibilities than others. In an effort to prepare for the conference, we employed the use of Facebook to communicate important details. With two groups in 2016-17, it will prove even more challenging to manage, I will need to investigate how I might ensure the groups work together and that there is a fair distribution between them. The students produced a video of the conference; I hope to encourage a similar showcase this coming academic year.

As part of the development of my module I sought qualitative feedback after the completion of the module, here are some of the responses I received:

Student A

Censorship and Society offered me something no other module ever did, and that is to assess and write about different oppressions that ourselves and others are subjected to everyday. It gives you a chance to analyse and question everything that you have been and are exposed to in the course of your life, such as your education at school, and the choice of your curriculum. You're given the opportunity to study books, films and discuss topics that have been censored, or made a taboo in different countries.

One of the things I truly enjoyed about the module, was the space that we were given during classes in which everyone could unreservedly speak their mind. You are encouraged to develop your own opinion. It's more of a module in which everyone needs to contribute, rather than a one-sided teaching course.

I also loved our assessment strategy. If you find essay-writing a little too dull, and that it has taken over your university life, Censorship and Society offers you the opportunity to write blog posts instead: A creative way to express your outlook on several topics that you will have discussed throughout the term. The presentation as well was a great means for everyone to elaborate on one specific subject that they had found interesting.

I truly found the whole module a breath of fresh air, it widens your perspective on several issues that make up the world we live in, and you finally get the chance to discuss matters that would rarely be spoken of otherwise.

Student B

I really enjoyed the module and particularly, the process of writing the end assessment (I chose to do the blog posts) for several reasons. Firstly, the blog posts challenged me to create a central argument that could be supported by 5 different areas or 'cases' or censorship. This posed a challenge different to most faced in most undergrad essay writing.

A downside of the blog post assessment though was that I was unsure of exactly what I needed to do to obtain a high grade precisely because it I'd never really done it before. The opportunity to blog weekly on a shared blog page to fellow students was a great way to ease people into blogging.

I really enjoyed learning about many different aspects of censorship. I liked the fact that mostly, each week would be on a different aspect of censorship! It was interesting to be lectured by different academics with different subject areas - it definitely challenged my way of thinking. However, at times I felt that it was too literature-heavy when it could have focused on other aspects of censorship. (But I think this also stems from me not being a literature student in a module with mostly literature students and thus, sometimes feeling out of depth). And overall, I did really enjoy being introduced to such interesting books!

The student conference was very interesting and a lovely way to learn about what fellow students researched - something which rarely happens in undergrad study! I very much enjoyed the day and the experience gained from helping to organise a student conference! Also, it was nice to be graded in such a different way. It made the module a very unique, interesting experience!

Student C

I really enjoyed completing the Censorship & Society module, primarily because it was unlike any of the other modules I have experienced at undergraduate level. What I particularly liked was the use of different external subject matter experts every week in order to provoke rich discussion and debate amongst the class on various topics. I also appreciated the varied assessment methods. Although the idea of blogging or presenting forming a part of our final marks was initially slightly daunting, these opportunities provided great scope to experiment, conduct original research and gain an idea of what presenting at an academic conference is like. The conference itself was well organised and the use of the Council Chamber provided a sufficiently serious, yet unintimidating environment in which to present. However, if I could change the way in which the assessment methods are weighted in relation to the overall mark for the module, I would give more weight to the creative assessment methods, such as the presentation and the reflective journal. Overall, I had a great experience with the module, and would definitely recommend it to future cohorts.

Forward Future Thinking

- I am in the process of adapting the 17-point marking scale for the various different assessments employed on the module.

- I will seek permission to vary the assessments for this academic year; I hope to completely abandon the traditional essay format.
- The module has been very popular and as a consequence has recruited two groups in its second year 2016-2017.
- I am already in discussions regarding where Censorship and Society might be positioned more permanently in 2017-2018.
- I am investigating how I might expand the problem of Censorship into further teaching opportunities.