

Final Project Report:
Module Development: Ethics and Children's Literature
Project funded by IATL for 29/9/14 – 27/6/15

Overview

This IATL award funded work by Philosophy and Literature PhD student Phil Gaydon, supervised by Eileen John in Philosophy, to develop an undergraduate module on Ethics and Children's Literature. There has been to date no such module offered at Warwick. This was an opportunity for curricular and pedagogic innovation, drawing on resources across the university. Children's literature itself is a growing area of research¹, and its specific importance to ethics is of central relevance to Gaydon's PhD thesis. Based on the work that Gaydon has carried out, and the successful module proposal he developed, for the module now titled 'Ethical Beings: An Interdisciplinary Investigation through Children's Literature', we think the project has been very fruitful and will make a positive impact on Warwick's undergraduate curriculum.

Project focus and aims

The intellectual core of the project concerns both what we mean by 'ethical being' and how we come to be ethical beings. What are the qualities and capacities, the processes, challenges and ideals, that contribute to becoming an ethical person? The development of the module proposal took as a promising hypothesis the idea that the creation, appreciation and scholarly study of literature for children can give us a deeper understanding of these issues. The focus on the child reader allows for foundational and developmental questions to be considered: when and why are people addressed as ethically responsible beings? what capacities need to be in place? how ethically important is emotion, and what shapes emotional response? can a person be an 'ethical authority' and how would such authority be relevant to others' ethical development? how do we learn ethically? The project did not assume that there is a clear distinction between child and adult with respect to ethical being, and indeed took the importance of the project to lie partly in what it may reveal about the challenges of ethical life at any age, but it did assume that address of the child reader would be illuminating with respect to how entry into ethical life is conceived and may be supported.

The literary context also allows for examination of the role of creative and imaginative activity in ethical life, and a further aim of the project was to develop a module that would both study that role and bring it to life through creative pedagogy. The OSL methods that Gaydon has used in other contexts would be built into the proposal for the module. The topic itself also has an immediately interdisciplinary range of reference, as it calls at least for investigation into literary, philosophical and psychological concerns. Gaydon's work on the project thus aimed to integrate intellectual, interdisciplinary, creative and pedagogical goals for the module.

In the autumn term, Gaydon was very active in seeking out and interviewing staff from around the university whose research bears on questions relevant to the module. He met with great success in this effort and established contacts with more staff, in fact, than could be drawn on in a given year's teaching for a 12/15 CATS module. Faculty from Law, Medicine, English and the Warwick Writing Programme, Centre for Education Studies, Film & TV, Psychology, PAIS, and Philosophy discussed in

¹ See, e.g., Claudia Mills, *Ethics and Children's Literature* (Ashgate, 2014); Lisa Sainsbury, *Ethics in British Children's Literature* (Bloomsbury, 2013); Jack Zipes, *Sticks and Stones* (Routledge, 2001); Thomas Wartenberg, *A Sneetch is a Sneetch and Other Philosophical Discoveries* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); along with earlier work by Gareth Matthews, *Philosophy and the Young Child* (Harvard UP, 1982) and *The Philosophy of Childhood* (Harvard UP, 1996). Note also the work of Cambridge's Centre for Children's Literature and *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children*.

detail material that could be the basis for one or more sessions of the module. These interviews and subsequent communications have given Gaydon an extensive grasp of the university's resources in relation to the questions addressed by the module, and this part of his work should be valuable for further projects and network-building involving children, ethical development, creative pedagogy, literature and other art forms.

Module planning workshop

Gaydon organised a two-day workshop in February to allow topics, materials and methods relevant to planning the module to be tried out and discussed. Prior to the workshop, we circulated a call for undergraduate lead-learners and received an excellent set of applications. We had budgeted for two lead-learners, to receive £100 each; given the interest shown in the pool of applicants, we requested and received funding from the Philosophy Department to hire two further half-time lead-learners, at £50 each. It turned out to be useful to have four lead-learners to cover the two days of the workshop.

The first day, 4 February, began with introductions and an ice-breaking activity in which all the attendees improvised to construct a 'story', word by word. There were three sessions that day: the first, led by Eileen John (Philosophy), set up basic ideas and questions about ethics and children's literature, and then the session broke out into group work on illustrations from children's books. This generated a lot of discussion and impressive depth of thinking; it was interesting how much they were able to derive from the illustrations, without knowing the surrounding works. The second session was led by Maebh Harding (Law), who presented the facts of a legal case that raises hard questions about children's autonomy, parental control and state responsibility. There was lively discussion of different views of the case and the issues raised; some feedback on this session suggested that it was not closely enough linked to children's literature. This is a fair point, though the issues at stake concerning autonomy and authority in children's lives are of substantial ethical interest for the purposes of the module. The third session was led by Catherine Lester (Film and Television) and focused on the genre of horror films for children, with substantial discussion following on the ethical issues surrounding the apparent goals of the films to scare children and the children's own ability to control and seek out levels of 'scariness' that they can enjoy and handle emotionally.

The second day, 5 February, involved three more sessions led by staff from different fields. The organiser, Phil Gaydon (Philosophy), led the first session on the ethics of sport, which involved group and team activities, including a theory-building exercise drawing on texts and images that triggered very interesting work and discussion. Peter Sidebotham (Medical School) gave a powerful talk about stories and child neglect, providing information about neglect and how it is observed and understood, and incorporating discussion of literary examples portraying children experiencing and dealing with neglect. Leila Rasheed (Creative Writing) drew on her experience as a children's author to consider the expectations we have for children's authors and the responsibilities they have. The day concluded with a plenary session discussing the workshop as a whole.

The workshop was fully subscribed with each session having over 30 attendees registered. Overall, there were 54 registrations from 20 different departments, the most being from the Centre for Education Studies (16). Of the delegates, 10 were staff, and the rest a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate students. The four undergraduate lead-learners were all in attendance on the first day, and two participated on the second day. Some of the plans for the workshop had to be adjusted at the last minute because, very unfortunately, Phil Gaydon was quite ill and unable to attend on the first day. He managed to attend for the second day, despite not being at full strength. The main consequences of this were that some of the OSL elements were not carried out, and some of the documenting and interviewing activities of the lead-learners were not implemented as Phil had

planned. Some useful feedback was obtained and videos of the lectures will be useful in reflecting on and creating module themes, but the filming that was carried out was not of sufficient quality to create an engaging and effective video record of the event. However, despite these problems, the workshop was stimulating, enjoyable and productive, not only testing some of the topics and methods envisioned for the module, but demonstrating that there is university-wide interest in the concerns of the module. The feedback received was generally very positive, with some constructive criticisms made concerning how the teaching space was used to encourage openness and active contribution, and with respect to how best to integrate the children's literature into discussion of the issues. The comments will 'feed back' into the way the module is taught in the coming year.

Module proposal

Phil Gaydon, with consultation from Eileen John, wrote and submitted a module proposal to IATL that was ultimately approved, with some revisions including the change to the title. It is hoped that 'Ethical Beings' will communicate well to students across disciplines, rather than linking the module too strictly to philosophical ethics. We originally planned to submit this as a Philosophy Honours module, but IATL suggested that it would be better to offer it as an interdisciplinary module through IATL, and we agreed.

The principle module aims are to:

- Develop student understanding of disciplinary theories concerning moral development.
- Introduce and problematize historical and contemporary conceptions of childhood.
- Explore how ethical learning has been tied to literary experience.
- Through children's literature, analyse specific ethical issues that are potentially important to developing ethical maturity, such as abuse, bereavement, bullying, and ecological concern.
- Critically reflect upon the impact of adult-child relationships in ethical development as put into practice in working environments and literature.
- Develop an awareness of and theorise about inter- and trans-disciplinary potential in this area of study.
- Engage students in innovative learning methods through Open-Space Learning workshops and close work with texts that link multiple forms of address and engagement (narrative, aesthetic, affective, imaginative, tactile, oral, dialogic, and so on).

The teaching will be carried out through a combination of lectures, workshops, and seminars. Students will also have two project supervisions to support the design and progress of their assessed work. This will include innovative assessment:

- An assessed piece will be designed in collaboration with the tutor. The student will create a piece intended to lead children through or help children overcome a moral dilemma. Students will be free to interpret the notion of the 'child', 'moral dilemma', and the interaction between these two in their assessment, drawing on how their understanding of these concepts has developed throughout the module. The piece will be presented to the group and the theory and ideas it incorporates will be explored via group discussion. The student will be marked on the piece and the theory as well as on their contributions to discussion of other students' pieces.

The webpage for the module is on the IATL site:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/activities/modules/ugmodules/ethicalbeings/

Future outcomes

- Gaydon will offer this module in Term 1 (Autumn 2015), with participation from staff in CES, English, Film and Television Studies, Law, Medicine, PAIS, Philosophy, and Psychology.
- Gaydon will present work on the topic of ethics and children's literature for a special seminar for the Centre for Research in Philosophy, Literature and the Arts.
- Gaydon has organised a new children's literature reading and research group, which has already started meeting and will explore new territory in this field and will strengthen and extend the network of people who came together through his work on this grant.
- Gaydon's research and activity in relation to this project is already contributing to his PhD research, which will include a chapter drawing on his experience using children's literature in teaching and study of ethical learning and development. The project has further contributed to Gaydon's professional development, as he has now successfully planned a module directly linking his research expertise and teaching. This will give him an innovative and substantial module to present as part of his professional qualifications.

In closing, we express our sincere gratitude to IATL for supporting this project.²



Eileen John

Cc: Phil Gaydon, Matt Nudds, Oliver Cooper

² The budget appendix will be submitted separately.