

The Warwick DAR

Project title:

The Warwick Database of Arabic Resources (Warwick DAR)

Activities:

a. **Context.**

The department of English and Comparative Literary Studies revised its undergraduate curriculum in 2010 with a view of increasing optionality in the choice of Honours level modules and encouraging specialisation by introducing pathways through the degree. One of the new pathways that was introduced is on World Literatures. This change in the curriculum encouraged me to devise a module on Arabic Literature which would serve as a survey of the key literary questions that preoccupy authors who write in Arabic. The module is focussed on a few countries whose literatures represent particular aspects of the experience of living in an Arabic-speaking country and whose novels have been translated into English.

While devising the module I became aware of a significant gap in the availability of sources to support students' learning. For example, there are no author biographies available in English, unless the author has won a Nobel Prize (Naguib Mahfouz) or else they are living in a Western country and their profile is provided by their agents (for example, Ahadf Soueif and Hanan el Sheikh who live in the UK; Nawal el Saadawi who lives in the US; Amin Maalouf who is in France...). There are some books, available to purchase, such as *The Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (1998) but the information is either out of date or else it is biased in its representation of the authors' political positions. I found a number of helpful Arabic websites dedicated to individual authors as well as a wide range of essays and reviews in Arabic newspapers. These resources were written in Arabic (some in French) and therefore inaccessible to my students.

Furthermore, since a tradition of literary criticism has not yet established itself in Arabic literature, most of the critiques of the novels I wanted to teach were written

by academics living and working in Western countries. The criticism is often focussed on applying theories on literature that were developed outside of the Arabic social and cultural contexts and has, in my opinion, limited value in terms of familiarising students with the world of novels.

The module I devised is targeted at Honours level students who have no prior knowledge of the history, geography or culture of the countries we examine (Egypt, Libya, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia). Therefore, I wanted to offer them a chance to experience the various facets of the protagonists' experiences. I wanted my students to experience the world of the novels with all their senses: to see the different landscapes of the city of Beirut on the Mediterranean, the breathtaking Libyan desert and the bustling metropolis of Cairo. I wanted them to taste the food that was mentioned in so many of the novels and to experience the smells that accompany the food and that are infused in the landscapes we read about. In addition, I wanted my students to understand the importance of the oral traditions that permeate life in the Arab world and including stories, songs, proverbs, poetry, superstitions and religious maxims that are exchanged in households, on the streets and in fiction. Some of these oral stories have been collected by anthropologists but it can be tricky to locate them.

In addition to the lack of social and cultural references, there is a conspicuous absence of intellectual spaces that encourage discussion of issues that relate to people's lives in the countries we are studying. I wanted to create a forum for discussion that allows students to exchange ideas and comment on each other's readings.

In devising this module, I was hoping to adopt innovative ways of teaching that would complement the traditional formats of the lecture and seminar. I decided to experiment by adopting new modes of assessment which invite students to communicate their research papers with audiences from various backgrounds and in different formats. In order to support this process, I needed to have a space where resources would be available to trigger original and novel ways of thinking.

b. **Rationale and Purpose**

The purpose of the project is to create a database of online resources that supports the teaching and learning of Arabic literary texts. In the first instance, the database will be focussed on the contents of the undergraduate module (EN274: Comparative Perspectives on Arabic Literature). Once these resources have been completed, the database will be broadened to support the delivery of 2 Masters level modules.

The database was developed while the teaching of the module was in progress, in its first year. I formed a small focus group made up of 3-4 students and asked them to feedback to me on the relevance of the material included in the database. I also asked them to suggest content and to contribute whatever resources they found to be useful. The constitution of the group changed every fortnight in order to allow all students the chance to feed into the shaping of the database.

c. Content and Layout

The content of the database is drawn from a variety of sources such as newspaper articles, journals, websites, books and magazines. I have been translating interviews with authors (with the interviewer's permission) and writing original essays on the contexts and literary components of each novel. All the content that is not clearly credited to another author is mine.

The layout of the database has been one of my recurrent concerns and I still don't know if I've got it right!

- First, I don't really know where to locate this database. At the moment, it can be reached via my personal departmental webpage and it is hyperlinked to the module's webpage. I'm not sure if this is the best way of presenting it.
- Second, I chose to have an interactive table of contents for the whole site to make it more accessible. My students like it and I think that it serves its purpose, but I don't know if it looks good / interesting. I have chosen to use tags and keywords to cross-link different pages and enable ease of navigation.

- Third, since this is primarily an educational tool, I wanted to construct it in such a way as to allow students to conduct research and improve their ability to write about Arabic texts. To this end, I included the Oxford style of transliteration as a point of reference. I would like to include sound bites next to each letter once I figure out a simple way of doing so.
- For each author / text the following format has been adopted
 - first page: Brief Author profile; Brief Context (history, geography including maps); brief background material; publication and translation information
 - subpages: Author profile; Context; Background material; Links to online sources

d. **Scope and Limitations**

The funding that I received from IATL has supported the construction of the first phase of the database: resource pages for the 20 texts/authors have been created and populated; a range of texts and visual materials was purchased; and 2 trips to Beirut (in March 2013) and Cairo (April 2013) have been arranged in order to film interviews and documentaries. The database contains information on authors from Egypt, Libya, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Although it is limited to specific authors, for the time being, the long term plan is to develop its content so that it encompasses authors from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Sudan.

Outcomes:

- a. **Challenges:** Almost as soon as I secured the funding from IATL, I contacted authors and publishers with a view to setting up interviews and filming documentaries. However, the political situation changed drastically and events in Tunis, which toppled the government and triggered a revolution that spread across to neighbouring countries, resulted in political and social instability. I was unable to reach writers or their agents because most of them preferred not to draw attention to their work during a time of political turmoil. I would say that the deterioration of the political situation in all the countries I wished to visit (Egypt,

Libya, Syria, Lebanon) was a significant factor in hindering the progress of the data collection phase.

Furthermore, I was not able to obtain a release from teaching duties as expected. Although 50% of my workload was delegated to a part-time tutor, my teaching load was increased in other areas so that I found myself working to an unusually busy timetable.

- b. **Accomplishments:** The database has proved to be a tremendous asset to my teaching and to the student's learning. Thanks to the availability of resources that offer a wider perspective on the texts we are studying, students have rated EN274 one of the best modules in the English Department (data available on end-of-year evaluation forms and on the LitSoc website where the module is reviewed). In fact, by the third week of term 1, the module had attracted 100 students. This is an unprecedented number for an option. I increased the number of seminars in order to teach a maximum of 70 students, and received unanimous positive feedback on the usefulness of Warwick DAR.

- *How I use the database*

What I have produced in this database is a teaching and learning tool that supports the lecture / seminar combination which I continue to use. This tool, allows students access to resources that encourage them to think beyond the scope of what we learn in seminars.

Each week, on Monday, I deliver a lecture which focuses on offering a particular reading of the novel. The lecture is podcast and made available for those who wish to listen again. Then, for the following 2 days, students are asked to browse through the material on Warwick DAR and decide on particular questions, themes, or problems they wish to discuss in the seminar on Thursday. Seminars are conducted interactively, using the webpages of the Warwick DAR which are projected on a screen. Often, a picture, a detail or a link triggers a student's curiosity; they research it and share their findings with us. Sometimes, students will be moved by a particular cultural practice and, working in groups, they attempt to articulate the specific challenges that they faced while decoding / translating these concepts. They use the Warwick DAR to read verses from the Koran that clarify the religious point of view but

they also access excerpts from popular culture (such as tales from the *Thousand and One Nights*) in order to distinguish between tradition, religion and superstition.

Last year, 5 students decided that they would like to investigate the various references to food which seem to be essential to understand the narrative of *The Story of Zahra and Sabriya*. They accessed recipes from the Warwick DAR and embarked on a marathon cooking project which produced a range of culinary treats that we shared in the seminar while listening to an oral presentation that depicted the experience of cooking “with other women”. Although this may seem like a frivolous activity, yet its consequences were felt by the students who had read about particular social practices in Syria and in rural Lebanon where the preparation of meals is a collective social experience. Women cook together, they keep an eye on each other, and they share resources.

This year, my students asked if we could create an online forum, blog or wiki where they could post their weekly tasks and comment on each other’s ideas. This seems to be an exciting idea which I will implement in future but I don’t think it should be incorporated into the Warwick DAR. I will however consider allowing comments to be posted on individual pages, but I need to think carefully about how I would manage those contributions.

The database is still a “work in progress”. The first phase will be finished once I have filmed, edited and published the interviews and documentaries from Lebanon and Cairo. At that point, I hope to open it up to the public and advertise its presence through twitter and on the departmental webpage.

In the coming academic year I will be teaching 2 Masters modules on Arabic fiction. By October 2013 I hope to be able to begin the second phase of populating the database with information that is relevant to those 2 modules.

Implications:

My experience of conceiving, designing and populating this database has helped me understand the opportunities and limitations of this type of resource. Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and I have

learned that the database must be developed and expanded on a weekly basis because there is a gap in scholarship on Arabic Literature for reliable, well-translated, unbiased resources. I would have liked to have more time to delve into the design and technical features of the database but I feel that the most important role for me at this stage is to publish the information online. In this respect, I would appreciate the input of a technically minded, aesthetically driven person to revamp and tidy up the database, while I continue to populate it. To this end, I will be getting in touch with newly appointed IT support technician in the Arts Faculty, David Beck, to ask for support and advice.

Overall, I am satisfied that the database is serving its purpose in providing accessible, up-to-date and original material that support the teaching and learning that takes place on EN274. I will be investing a great deal of time to it during the summer term with a view to opening it up for the MA modules in October.

Resources:

Please see the appendix which shows screenshots from the database.