

Ellie Chambers & Marshall Gregory

Teaching & Learning
**English
Literature**

Teaching & Learning the Humanities in Higher Education

SAGE



Teaching & Learning English Literature

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Ellie Chambers & Marshall Gregory

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Teaching and Learning the Humanities in Higher Education

SERIES EDITORS: Ellie Chambers and Jan Parker, The Open University

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Ellie Chambers and Marshall Gregory

Ellie Chambers is Professor of Humanities Higher Education in the Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University, UK. Since 1974 she has worked as a pedagogic adviser, evaluator and researcher with colleagues in the university's Faculty of Arts. In 1992 she founded the interdisciplinary Humanities Higher Education Research Group and in 1994, with colleagues, the national Humanities and Arts Higher Education Network. She regularly addresses conferences internationally and has published widely in the fields of distance education and Arts and Humanities higher education – including the best-selling book for students, *The Arts Good Study Guide* (1997, with Andrew Northedge). Currently, she is founding Editor-in-Chief of *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice* (Sage) and a Member of Council, the Society for Research into Higher Education.

Dr. Jan Parker is a Senior Research Fellow of The Open University's Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology and chairs the Humanities Higher Education Research Group. Founding editor of the Sage journal *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice* and Executive Editor of *Teaching in Higher Education* (Taylor and Francis), she still teaches and writes on her disciplinary specialisation, Greek Tragedy, and is a Senior Member of the Faculty of Classics, Cambridge. She is currently co-writing the *Teaching and Learning Classics and Classical Studies* volume of this series.

Foreword

Those of us working in the national English Subject Centre are acutely conscious of a paradox. That is that the family of English subjects in British universities study communication in a very sophisticated way, and harbour a wide variety of pedagogic methods. Since its inception, the subject has been committed to what we now know by the portmanteau phrase 'learning and teaching'. Yet, by and large, university teachers of English – in Britain at all events – find it hard to make their tacit pedagogic knowledge conscious, or to raise it to a level where it might be critiqued, shared or developed. In our experience, colleagues find it relatively easy to talk about curriculum and resources, but far harder to talk about the success or failure of seminars, how to vary forms of assessment, or to make imaginative use of Virtual Learning Environments. Too often this reticence means falling back on default assumptions about student learning, about teaching or about forms of assessment. There is a real question as to where new pedagogic understandings may be formed. Thus we are aware that many starting lecturers and their colleagues pass severe judgements on the university diploma courses they are required to take. Meanwhile, for those who seek to support English lecturers, there is a shortage of subject-specific material to recommend.

Ellie Chambers' and Marshall Gregory's timely book cannot provide all the answers, but it will be found an invaluable resource by new (and not so new) lecturers in English Literature. It is a thoroughly researched and stimulatingly detailed addition to the kind of dialogue that the English Subject Centre seeks to foster. While rich in practical ideas, it is not simply a compendium of tips. It sets out to ground its suggestions in a theorised account of the subject – an account which attends to the grammars that govern the interaction between teachers

and students, the protocols of dialogue and assessment, and above all to the collaborative nature of the productive processes in which both teachers and students engage. The underlying argument is that 'content and pedagogy are inseparable' [p. 25]. The practical consequence is that the methods teachers choose should be sensitively attuned to the specific demands of what they are trying to achieve.

This book is articulated along two complementary lines of thought. The authors rightly refuse to be drawn into what they describe as the 'knee-jerk reaction that teaching is inherently suspect' [p. 42]. While we all have much to learn from the learner-centred orthodoxies of the last quarter century, teachers nevertheless have responsibilities towards their subject and towards their students. At the same time even a passionate commitment to the subject needs to be complemented by hard, careful thought about curriculum and module design, and about the structuring of seminars. For the other half of the argument is that 'we cannot assume that our students just know how to read a literary text' [p. 47]. Nor do they intuitively know how to take part in a seminar discussion. While the responsibility of the teacher is to create and hold the spaces in which learning can take place, that does not in itself entail a vow of silence. The teacher also has the role of modelling the discourse, and while it may sometimes be appropriate to withhold his or her superior knowledge, there are also occasions when it is just as appropriate to share it. In this light, Chambers and Gregory provide a wealth of detail about module design, seminar process, assessment, and feedback, modelling the process of dialogue as they do so.

The great strength of this book is that it is grounded simultaneously in pedagogic theory and in 'an approach to teaching in which literary experience is taken to be an important form of human learning ...' [p. 149]. Enriched by this dual focus, it promises to become a welcome contribution to the teaching of university English.

Ben Knights
Director, English Subject Centre
Higher Education Academy

Introduction

Whether or not the discipline of English Literature is ‘in crisis’ is something we consider right at the start of this book. But if not in crisis, it is certainly a discipline in the process of marked change. Curriculum, syllabus, teaching and student assessment methods all are pressured by significant social and political forces. In recent times, for example, these forces and government policies have produced:

- a ‘massification’ of higher education, with no commensurate increase in resource for teaching;
- a dominant discourse of the marketplace;
- a related instrumental pedagogic discourse of measurable ‘learning outcomes’ and skills ‘transferable’ to the workplace, underpinned by a so-called learner-centred ideology;
- increased resource for and dependence on information and communication technologies (ICTs);
- a convergence of distance and conventional education and the emergence of a ‘blended’ form of learning for all.

The study and teaching of English is also shaped by our students’ purposes and the conditions in which they live and work, and by academics’ shifting ideas about the nature of the discipline and its relationship to other, adjacent, fields. In the modern world, can we still talk about English Literature or should we substitute Literatures in English? What is Literature’s wider relationship to Media and Film Studies, and Cultural Studies?

At the start of the book we take it as axiomatic that there is an identifiable discipline of English literature, that it has certain central characteristics and outer limits. But, as the book progresses and we examine the curriculum and our teaching and assessment methods in more detail, boundaries become less distinct. Perhaps limits come to seem more like limitations. Or maybe they just matter less.

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in a web of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.

(Geertz, 1975: 5)

Perhaps, after all, the search for meaning is something that unites the Humanities.

If this hypothesis is worthy of at least provisional acceptance, it follows that the study and teaching of literature will play a central role – and has always played a central role – in human beings' search for meaning. Literature, as a subset of story, acts, as do all other forms of story, to perform such all-important functions as telling human beings what is important in life, telling us what's worthy of our admiration or our contempt, telling us what it's like to be those who live in different circumstances and in other historical times and in other gendered bodies, telling us what we should pay attention to and what we can afford to ignore, and, in short, telling us how life might be lived *this* way rather than *that* way. Among the many different ways that the Humanities search for meaning, deploying our resources for reading literature well and teaching it effectively must be among the most important resources we can deploy in general, not just for disciplinary purposes but for the more broadly educational purposes of preparing our students for their overall lives, for their careers, for parenthood, for civic responsibility and for moral and ethical thoughtfulness.

The book differs somewhat in its aims from others of its kind (for example, Showalter, 2002; Agathocleus and Dean, 2002; Widdowson, 1999). Written by a US English professor and an educationist with an academic background in Literature, it aims to introduce its audience to an analysis of how educational ideas – both 'classic' texts and recent research – illuminate our subject. Literature is always at the heart of things, but from there we try to move 'out' to make fruitful connections to current educational thinking. Readers may, or may not, like to follow those leads. In the UK, where new university lecturers will soon be required to gain a teaching qualification, the need may be most pressing. We hope that the book will at least get them started – and from a basis in the discipline.

The first three chapters are designed to act as an introduction, especially for those who are beginning or relatively new teachers of Literature. There we 'show' as well as tell, demonstrating a close-

reading seminar class and (on the book's website) a tutorial on an approach to teaching literary theory and criticism. We also discuss approaches to teaching essay writing, specifically via the writing workshop. And so we explore some of the main 'problems' involved in teaching Literature (teaching close reading, theory and writing) while also demonstrating some of Literature's main teaching methods (the seminar, tutorial and workshop).

Thereafter, we hope that the book's appeal is broader. Chapter 4 onwards takes the reader from planning the curriculum and courses in Literature, through a range of modern teaching-learning methods, to the issues surrounding student assessment – and finally, in Chapter 7, to evaluation of our work and performance as teachers. This whole planning process, perhaps presented somewhat seamlessly, is in reality messier. But, nonetheless, we trust that discussion of it raises some important issues for teachers, illuminated by the sample course outlines (including essay and exam questions) and assessment regimes presented on the book's website.

These example courses and regimes are drawn mainly from practice in the UK (although readers may use the web addresses offered in the Bibliography and Appendix 7 on the website to access literature course models from Australia and North America). This emphasis reflects the fact that, in the UK, the government and its agencies now make certain demands of teachers of all disciplines. For example, the UK Quality Assurance Agency requires that teachers in higher education should stipulate certain demonstrable 'outcomes' of their programmes, as regards the students' content knowledge and skills, to specified standards. And we demonstrate in the book that similar accountability and quality assurance measures are being introduced elsewhere. Looking at the situation in the UK – the 'worst case', as it were – is therefore instructive all round.

But, in addition to this, some educators are becoming involved in what is now termed a 'scholarship of teaching' (discussed in Chapter 7) – incorporating new media in their teaching, taking a more systematic interest in what goes on in the classroom or online and in their students' learning, asking questions about what they do and why. For them teaching is becoming less a job and more an intellectual activity worthy of serious consideration and investigation. This might just put an end to what George Levine (2001: 7) describes as 'the split between our work as teachers and our work as scholars'. Although he acknowledges that at present 'within the scholarly universe of the

profession, knowledge about teaching does not for the most part count as 'knowledge' ', he goes on to say:

Teaching literature is a subject, and a difficult one. Doing it well requires scholarly and critical sophistication, but it also requires a clear idea of what literature is, of what is entailed in reading and criticizing it. It requires, in fact, some very self-conscious theorizing. But beyond the questions that ought to feed any serious critic's sense of what doing literature might mean, there are questions about the relation between such sophistication and the necessities of the classroom: what, how, and when are students most likely to learn?

(Levine, 2001: 14)

If this book helps to stimulate such questioning among literature teachers, its authors will be well pleased.

1

The discipline today

IN CRISIS?

Culture wars

No Literature academic, long established or just beginning, can be unaffected by the 'culture wars' that in the last two decades or so have ravaged our scholarly community, and indeed the Humanities generally. Western governments' neglect of the Humanities, even to the point of repudiation, and their concurrent outpourings of resource for research and teaching in the so-called productive areas of the higher education curriculum – business, technology, the applied sciences – undoubtedly galvanised many humanists, but in ways that commentators (especially in North America)¹ have identified as an aspect of 'the crisis' itself. That is, in such a situation of dwindling resource for the discipline and perceived loss of its status within the academy, colleagues tended to turn on each other

in culture wars and canon wars that feature campus radicals versus conservative publicists, proponents of multiculturalism versus defenders of tradition, scholars who insist on the political construction of all knowledge versus those who would preserve the purity and beauty of a necessarily nonpolitical, because objective, truth.

(Scott, 1995: 293)

And these activists, in both traditionalist and radical camps, joined in (always justified?) scorn of their more utilitarian, entrepreneurial colleagues who, then and now, would 'sell' their services within the favoured, well-resourced domains – offering courses in medical ethics, for example, or communications for business managers, or in logical thinking, problem-solving and other so-called generic and transferable skills – for either their compliance or their debasement of a once-precious coinage.

'Marketing' higher education

Meanwhile, many of us look on in perplexity, fearing the worst as humanities departments continue to be merged or axed, faculty numbers and class-contact hours cut and our once coherent curricula reduced to short modules which students pick and mix like outfits from the shopping mall. At the same time, we are exhorted to introduce 'flexible' learning methods to cope with periodic bouts of expansion in student numbers (video-taped lectures, virtual seminars via computer conferencing), and to focus increasingly on our students' employability and acquisition of related skills. Insult adds to injury when such 'developments' are held up as progressive: as the elements of an architecture of client-centred Lifelong Learning, or some similarly opaque assertion our education has taught us to question and fully equipped us to demolish. For many academics in the Humanities, and perhaps especially in literary studies, vehemently reject such a retail model of higher education – a model in which every institution's first concern is to keep the paying customers coming through the door, and teachers are the floor clerks who keep those customers happy.

However, it's not all gloom and doom. It is clear that the apprenticeship model of higher education – in which disciplines are 'tribes', with their different, clearly marked out, well defended 'territories' (Becher and Trowler, 2001) and their academics busy training the next generation of scholars – is giving way under the pressures of national and international competition and of students' buying power to looser curriculum formations and an economy that is demand- as well as supply-led. These are shifts of emphasis that many in the academy welcome. And they may simply be inevitable in the situation of widening access to higher education in the age of the Internet (see Edwards and Usher, 2001). The main danger is of course a dumbing down of higher education generally, as newspaper headlines about Mickey Mouse courses attest (especially in some of the newer fields, such as Media Studies) and as many academics themselves fear. In this connection, we would just point to the widely acknowledged high academic standards of the UK Open University, which since 1969 has successfully offered a modular programme predicated on the widest possible choice to adult students who need have no previous educational qualifications at all. Dumbing down is a danger, then, but it is not inevitable.

Understanding global forces

And, at least, humanities disciplines are not alone in all this. Indeed, it is now widely accepted that there is 'a global crisis of rising demand for higher education which races ahead of the public funding to meet it' (Channon, 2000: 255, citing Goddard). We may conclude that, after all, the 'crisis' of the Humanities reflects an infrastructural crisis in all higher education, even if humanities disciplines perhaps come off worst. Furthermore, if (with Bourdieu, 1988) we first distinguish between the cognitive and the social structures of the disciplines – their academic (knowledge/actively intellectual) and their social (power/socially reproductive) dimensions – and, second, identify some disciplines as clearly located at the cognitive end of the spectrum (e.g. natural science) with others (such as business studies) at the social/temporal end, we may then locate the Humanities towards the cognitive end, in a state of some tension between the poles. This analytical framework (which, note, does not entail judgements of disciplinary value) can help make sense of the bewildering array of forces currently acting upon higher education and its effects. For the world-wide trend towards mass higher education systems is a phenomenon that emphasises the social/temporal dimension of *all* disciplines (Kelly, 2001) – an emphasis that is likely to have especially distorting effects on those disciplines located towards the cognitive end of the spectrum.

That is, as ever-larger numbers of students enter higher education systems, these systems – yoked as they are to the economic demands of an ever more global marketplace – are increasingly geared to the students' future employment and capacity to contribute to national wealth. A major aim of a higher education, then, is that students should acquire marketable skills. In the UK, for example, these skills are to be demonstrated by the students' competent performance of the 'learning outcomes' that their teachers must stipulate for them in advance – with teachers' own performance measured accordingly and controlled for 'quality'. Thus we all become constrained to think about our teaching goals and methods in similar terms, whether our field is Biology or Business or Literature. It is as if, when it comes to teaching, the structure, purposes and pedagogy of all disciplines were one and the same. And it is as if students themselves may have no educational goals or preferences of their own.

Truce and federation

While the particular tensions such constraints give rise to will of course differ within and among humanities as well as other disciplines, we should try to understand our own situation in a way that inspires something more productive than either panic or paralysis. With respect to Modern Languages, Kelly's solution to avoiding disciplinary fracture and marginalisation – to achieving both the social unity needed to address issues of power and the cognitive diversity required to create new knowledge – is 'federation': large departments or units that may 'speak with one voice', acting on behalf of all their members and, at the same time, fostering and sustaining a wide range of intellectual interests (Kelly, 2001: 55). If the situation of Modern Languages is in its essentials representative of other humanities then might not such a notion of federation profitably be extended to the Humanities as a whole, including Literature? Clearly, this would entail a truce in the culture wars and a genuine coming together to forge new understandings.

Indeed, it seems that the worst of the conflict is behind us now (Gregory, 2002). A recent contribution to the debate from another American academic, who was a student at the height of the culture wars (Insko, 2003), suggests teaching for democratic citizenship as a way forward, while Gregory himself (2001: 87) recommends the 'humanization of the social order'; Bérubé (2003) promotes ways of valuing the 'utility' of cultural work; Gerald Graff (2003), by 'teaching the conflicts', suggests yet another possibility. And evidence that there is a will to forge new understandings emerging widely in the Humanities came our way in response to a proposal in 2001 to establish an academic journal of Arts and Humanities higher education (*Arts and Humanities in Higher Education: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, Sage Journals (www.sagepub.co.uk)). Various, the (anonymous) international respondents pointed to the need:

- ... for a potential rallying-point for the politics of those dedicated to a remarkably resilient yet systematically slighted area of education. We don't get the big grants ... but we do get the students, and the interest ... we're big education providers/cultivators for post-industrial societies. After all, by and large, we insist on education (not training alone), and flexibility and adaptability (not narrow vocationalism).

- ... *for ways to cut the humanities coat according to the shrinking cloth on the one hand, developing arguments that may at least have some potential to reverse this trend on the other.*
- ... *genuinely to bring together top-level thought on research-led pedagogy across humanities disciplines, which strengthens links between those disciplines without denying their separate identities.*

However, as we have seen, certain indicators are plain discouraging. Internally, some humanities disciplines are deeply fractured, perhaps especially Literature. It appears that within the Humanities generally there exists little agreement about desirable purposes, curricula and teaching practices – partly as a consequence of differences in response to the external pressures just noted, and also owing to different underlying conceptions of the disciplines themselves (see Chambers (2001) for discussion of traditional, radical and utilitarian views of Literature as a discipline). In starting this book with such sobering reflections we recognise no more than is true and no more than beginning academics will indeed encounter. It is because of this backdrop that what we say in it has urgency. And of course through the book we aim to point up the distinctiveness of our discipline, and to help achieve the kind of unity of purpose and understanding that will sustain its vitality.

Disciplinary vigour

In any case, we must not lose our nerve. Literature courses have traditionally attracted large numbers of students and they continue to do so. In spite of the difficulties involved when resources for teaching are far from commensurate, what this means is that many people actually *want* to study Literature. If they didn't, the discipline's 'crisis' would more likely be the discipline's demise. And these people we now see in our classrooms (or, in a mode such as distance education, perhaps don't see at all) could hardly be more heterogeneous: of all ages, and social and ethnic backgrounds; with a range of previous experience of education and of qualifications from virtually nil to standard higher education entry requirements and beyond. In the UK, a series of assessment visits made in 1994–5 to 72 per cent of university English departments revealed that in over a third of the departments 'the quality of education was judged to be excellent' (and of the remainder, to be satisfactory in all but three cases). The assessors continue:

Excellence was identified across a variety of programmes, institutions, approaches to subject delivery and assessments of the curriculum. Positive features included: vigour in the curriculum; success in attracting capable, enthusiastic students; widening of access – particularly to mature, returning students – without any diminution in quality; high retention rates; student achievement that in general reflects considerable intellectual challenge . . .; positive views held by past and present students about the quality of their learning experience; and excellent staff–student relations.

(QAA, *Subject Overview Report – English*, 1995;
Summary: at www.qaa.ac.uk – accessed March 2004)

So there is much that is encouraging.

It remains to be seen *why* students might want to study Literature and just what kind of education it is that they want or expect. But first we step back a bit, to consider where we're 'coming from'. Given the focus of the book, our starting point is of course pedagogy.

FROM ANCIENT PEDAGOGY . . .

Traditional pedagogy in literature classes has its roots in the ancient pedagogy of classical language instruction. This was a pedagogy aimed mostly at students 'getting it right'. The beginning stages of Latin and Greek do not provide occasions for student 'interpretation'; students can't *have* independent opinions about semantics, syntax, tenses, inflections and the like. Thus, the very pedagogy that is so much maligned today – students mimicking and parroting their teachers' knowledge and injunctions – was the pedagogy that for centuries was successful in beginning Latin and Greek classes. Once beyond the beginning stages, the content of classics classrooms was of course not language as such, but Greek and Latin philosophy and literature (Horace, Cicero, Seneca, Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Thucydides, Aristotle), and in translating these complex and nuanced texts questions of interpretation and judgement would increasingly come to the fore. Nonetheless, these roots in the pedagogy of Greek and Latin instruction partly explain why, historically, literature pedagogy of a 'top-down' kind has had so much momentum and why it has taken so long to alter or modify it.

Literature pedagogy

When Classics and Literature finally went their separate disciplinary ways, and literature teaching was mounted on the platform of students' own language rather than difficult and dead 'foreign' languages, the pedagogy of Literature could be loosened considerably. The issue in reading literature was no longer tied to students 'getting it right' as a matter of necessity. They could be encouraged to develop their own interpretive opinions. However, the magisterial rightness as represented by the teacher was a strongly entrenched tradition in the academy and did not immediately melt away. Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, students in literature classes were still taught as if their job was to 'get it right', if not tenses and inflection then interpretations and meanings. The right interpretations and meanings came not from student thought, inquiry or questioning, and certainly not from student 'opinion', which most teachers until recently (and some still, if truth be told) viewed in quotation marks, but from the instructor. 'Right opinion' was what the teacher thought. Today, given the challenges the discipline faces, there is even more reason willingly and imaginatively to jump outside the authoritarian frame that teachers and students may sometimes still inhabit.

Perhaps, therefore, the most helpful thing we might say about pedagogy at this early stage of the book is to recommend not this or that 'local' strategy, such as 'do seminars, not lectures' or 'do workshops, not seminars', but to discuss a 'global' approach designed to help teachers help students think more deeply than they might about the possible uses and value of literary study. Later, in Chapter 5, we discuss such local teaching strategies as lectures, seminars and so on, but, for now, we'll explore some ideas that may help teachers acquaint students with a deeper sense not of how to do literary study, but *why* do it at all.

In what follows we want to explore three sets of ideas. First, we want to investigate what kinds of connection students can make with literary works that contribute to their overall education, to the development of their minds and knowledge. Second, we want to suggest that the framing action of pedagogy is a more important variable in students' learning than teachers often think. Third, we want to describe in outline a particular pedagogical approach that helps students make a personal and educational connection with

literary works: a pedagogic framework that is ‘ancient’ in the sense of enduring, and enduringly human.

Student connections: connected students

The kinds of connection that many students want to make to the literature they study can be called, for lack of a better term, existential, that is connections between literature on the one hand, and the basic, enduring terms and conditions of human existence on the other. A line of iambic pentameter in a Shakespeare play or a Keats sonnet may be a thing of beauty forever, but it may not seem so, initially at least, to an 18-year-old freshman or to a 35-year-old adult returning to education in the midst of pressures from employment or parenthood. For both of these students, as different as their circumstances may be, the invitation from a literature teacher who – perhaps kindly, but sometimes cluelessly – thinks her or his own enthusiasm for the technicalities of literature should generate similar enthusiasm in the student, winds up convincing both the 18 year old and the 35 year old of literature’s irrelevance to the reality of their everyday lives. Such teacherly enthusiasm is often a bit myopic: what the teacher finds interesting may be a very small blip on any student’s radar screen. Teachers need more than their own interests and enthusiasms in order to make a case to students for the value of literary study.

One way to make such a case is to provide a pedagogical frame for literary instruction drawn from conditions that affect all students because they affect all human beings. These conditions include but are not exhausted by: the need for growth, doubts and fears about success, the need for affiliation with others, the unavoidability of dealing with families, the need for friends and companions, the uncertainty of luck, the commonality of the physical senses, the frailty of the flesh, the certainty of loss and grief, the inevitability of death.

The human condition

It is of course very difficult to get contemporary students raised on TV and the literary equivalent of Pop-Tarts to feel any sort of personal connection with the strange behaviour, values and language of such literary artists and moralistic thinkers as the Beowulf poet, Chaucer, Milton, Swift, Pope and Samuel Johnson. And much talk about the benefits of education seems premised on the shallow assumption that students’ only interests in it are material and financial. But we all