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Using creative writing to understand the student experience (0119)

Programme number: J10

Research Domain: Student Experience

Studying in Britain is a module which uses creative writing as a means of inquiring about the UK student experience. The module was designed for Erasmus and Study Abroad students studying English at the University of Sheffield, adopting a creative writing methodology previously developed within the department. It is structured around a series of seminars, each exploring readings relevant to the student experience in Britain. These are taken from the literature on HE, but also from complementary literatures, such as material on the night-time economy, alcohol, and other aspects of youth culture not always considered when discussing the student experience.

Varsity novels,¹ such as Kevin Sampson's *Freshers* (2003) are read by the students, alongside local student newspapers and student targeted magazines such as *Cosmo on Campus*. Through these varied texts and their own observations students develop an understanding of how HE is structured in Britain, but also develop a sense of how that structure might be mediated, inhabited and experienced by students. The teaching aim is for students to understand how culture, particularly student culture, relates to economic, political and social themes. On a more conceptual level, students are encouraged to reflect on how reality is constructed, and how writing contributes to that process.

Indeed, students are asked to produce creative writing of their own in the form of four assessed journal entries commenting on the texts read in class, a presentation on issues in Higher Education and an essay dealing with a subject of their choice. The creative writing aspect of the journals, presentation and essays must be accompanied by a referenced non-fictional reflection demonstrating and expanding on what the students were attempting to express in their creative writing. It is only the reflection that is assessed. In this way, students are not tasked with creating art, but with using creative writing as a 'mode of inquiry', a means of understanding, empathising and imagining. Students can thus comment on HE and student experience from the psychological, emotional perspective that creative writing privileges. Exchange students are thus encouraged to 'voice the other': imagine the student experience of British students. This methodology was developed within the department by Duco Van Oostrum and Richard Steadman-Jones (2007) in relation to English Literature on a course held in association with CILASS (Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social

¹ So called 'varsity novels' are fiction about university written from the perspective of the student, in comparison to 'campus novels' which are written from the perspective of staff (Cuddon, 2013).

Sciences). Within the University of Sheffield it can be understood as an inquiry-based legacy of that particular CETL.

The module was designed to address a practical problem on behalf of the exchange students who had expressed dissatisfaction with being taught separately from full term students. This decision was made some time ago at a departmental level as teachers and students had complained that some Erasmus and Study Abroad students were not proficient enough in English to participate fully in class (as Modern Language students in their home universities they were being taught in a UK English Studies department, where the vast majority of students possessed English as their first language). This, however, caused problems with the exchange students, who complained that they were not, in fact, having an exchange and were being segregated. It also created a very diverse, mixed ability class of students, often of different ages and levels. The module was thus designed with a singular methodology applicable to texts situated at a range of difficulty levels.

The module also satisfied both a personal desire and a research motivation on behalf of the module convenor (myself). As a teacher in the School of English I had long wanted to run a module focused on the cultural study of Higher Education. Combining campus novels, literature on HE, creative writing and theory on the relationship of language to reality allowed me to do so whilst satisfying students enrolled on an English Studies programme (and, due to their status as exchange students, curious about the British system). I was also concerned with the study of the student experience, which I had previously considered from an ethnographic perspective. This led me to question the ways in which study of the student experience might neglect those aspects which fall outside the official university of learning and teaching (such as intersections with the night-time economy). My own experience, research and even the prevalence of varsity novels indicate that student experience is much richer than much of the HE literature, with its focus on student engagement with the institution, suggests.

Post-module recorded focus groups with students and anonymous module assessments suggest the module has been effective and especially useful in allowing students to empathise with the a full range of positive and negative aspects of a neoliberal, monetized HE system. The paper will present these responses in depth, suggesting that creative writing which 'voices the other' can be an effective exploratory technique in understanding not only the student experience, but how it functions in an individuated, neoliberal, monetized environment. One of the themes emerging from exchange student's work were attempts to understand the personal motivation of British students in engaging in their education. There was a recognition that a range of emotions and feelings towards being a student in a competitive, market saturated environment could be experienced without any seeming contradiction. This allowed some students in their reflections to develop nuanced critiques of the neoliberal university environment, ones which were both sympathetic and critical. The individuating appeals of the UK HE system were thus appreciated in a way which is often ignored by the literature attacking neoliberalism (Larner, 2013). As a result the module has led me to a rich understanding of the lived experience of HE, in a way comparable, though distinct in terms of empiricism, from ethnographic research.

Cuddon, J. A. (2013) *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 5th Edition, London: Wiley-Blackwell.

Larner, W (2013) 'Beyond the Neoliberal University' a Contesting Education and Research seminar at The University of Sheffield (6/3/13).

Sampson, K. (2003) *Freshers*, London: Jonathan Cape.

Van Oostrum, D. and Steadman-Jones, R. (2007) 'Taking the Imaginative Leap: Creative Writing and Inquiry-Based Learning,' *Pedagogy* 7(3), p. 556–66.