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Editor’s introduction

Dr Deesha Chadha

Welcome to the fifth edition of HERN J’s prize winning essays. In this edition, we have gathered essays that highlight and address the unique challenges of the disciplinary dialogue and how it informs the perception of the teacher.

Like all other prize-winning essays in this series, this edition brings together some of the best work submitted by college teaching staff in part fulfilment of the Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice in Higher Education (PGCAPHE). We present six essays, two of them situated in mathematics education, three in English and one in classics. All of the work is brought together by a shared focus on creativity and what it means to create meaningful disciplinary learning spaces. What is at stake is the ways in which disciplinary practice and teaching intermingle (see Wareing, 2009; Chadha, 2013) to make teaching a creative act. As Budge and Clarke (2012) suggest, creative teaching acts have the potential to inspire, critique, inform and bring about vital educational change. In the pages of this volume, you will find strong narratives of teaching which do indeed inspire, develop and inform higher education: and perhaps these will bring about change which reaches further than the evidence of the individual accounts.

Two of the essays, specifically consider how mathematics is taught in higher education. In her essay on the challenges of teaching maths to undergraduate chemists, Carmen Domene outlines the challenges and the potential of teaching mathematics in chemistry. One of the problems she faces in the classroom is in addressing the different levels of academic ability of students and another lies in persuading students to apply their knowledge to real problems. Also exploring the practices of mathematics, Paolo Battistotti discusses the division that lies between deep and surface approaches to learning, which have influenced teaching at higher education level for decades. Paolo goes a step further and addresses these approaches with ones that include notions of ‘pride and prejudice’. According to Paolo, prejudice is attributed to unfamiliarity with the topic, teaching being very detailed and carefully planned and importance being given to students’ feedback. Pride, on the other hand is attributed to familiarity and confidence in the material, teaching being essential and improvised and there being limited consideration to students, their needs and issues. Both these contributors attempt to address specific concerns around students’ preferences for surface-based approaches to learning mathematics – attributed to it being seen as a difficult subject and students’ lack of confidence in their capabilities – and the associated importance given to the teachers’ ability to empathise in order to support students’ acquisition of knowledge. Through their observations, and by appreciating and reflecting on the difficulties faced by the students, both Carmen and Paolo have consciously altered their approach to teaching so that it is more student-centred. By recalling their own experiences as students, they have developed their practice through empathising with their students. Empathy is used in this same way to discuss the creative acts as it, along with other emotional states, allows an individual to develop the
and see what cannot ordinarily be seen, opening up different possibilities.

The three essays from English explore how critical thinking in the discipline is expressed and how students may develop critical thought through more innovative and less traditional methods of teaching English. In her essay on addressing first year students’ assumptions about the middle ages, Kathryn Maude reflects upon her attempts to challenge the student view and put across a more nuanced view of the medieval period. Kathryn refers to the use of different translations to encourage discussion on issues related to reading text, such as gender and power. George Legg presents an evaluative case study in which he discusses the various strategies he employed when attempting to create a learning environment amenable to reading for accumulated meanings between texts. The essay draws on concept mapping to illustrate how a different type of approach to reading can be used to promote critical thinking. Meanwhile, Melissa Dickson teases out the specific interactional characteristics and internal hierarchies of a particular second-year seminar group to examine how she might best use discussion as a means of facilitating student engagement with set texts and improving students’ skills in her reflective case study. Divergent critical voices are brought into the classroom as a means of encouraging divergent opinions. All three authors focus on tackling different aspects of critical thinking in learning English by identifying the learning bottlenecks of their students and modelling expert behaviour that addresses these bottlenecks (Middendoff and Pace 2004). Teachers develop critical thinking in their students by demonstrating, for them, how they may solve the problems of learning that are encountered by these bottlenecks. In essence this mode of problem solving which is discussed by the three contributors – George’s attempt to show students how to link concepts, Kathryn’s to use artefacts to spark interest in the middle ages and Melissa’s to redefine engagement with set texts, is regarded as an important cognitive feature of the creative arts whereby problems are solved when important choices are made about appropriateness, relevancy, purpose and interaction (Hayes, 1989).

In the final essay, Aikaterini-Iliana Rassia provides a critical reflection of her seminar teaching practice in Classics, stressing the importance of the adoption and implementation of new teaching strategies for enhancing the student experience. The emphasis here is on engagement which, according to the author, constitutes interest, enjoyment and interaction. Thus, Aikaterini-Iliana explains how engagement and persistence go hand in hand in creative acts using the work of Gilbert (2009) to explain how commitment is required alongside a deep rooted trust that perseverance will yield success. Aikaterini-Iliana speaks of this sense of commitment in her essay and her over-arching desire to implement a number of innovative strategies and ‘practice until she is perfect’.

Collectively and drawn together, these essays suggest teaching as a form of artistic impression whereby the contributors have used their knowledge of disciplinary teaching, their observations and reflections to create a unique, personal vision of teaching. All the authors have demonstrated a willingness and ability to respond creatively to the challenges that they have encountered within their disciplinary taught practice. Each of the contributors has reflected upon the ‘mindful application of creative processes’ (Budge and Clarke, 2012,
p.68) and fully embraced teaching as a creative act which brings with it an opportunity to reconceptualise teaching, based upon a more personally meaningful definition of student learning. Similarly, the authors have been able to provide us with some useful ideas through which we may also ask challenging question of our practice as teachers, and seek opportunities to develop our own creative talents in this area.

References


The rewarding challenge of teaching Maths to undergraduate chemists

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Abstract
In this study, I will outline anecdotal experiences and the subsequent reflections on the issues I have encountered this year teaching Maths to undergraduate chemists, and how I addressed them. These issues included low self-confidence in the student body, with a considerable number of students having rather unhelpful feelings about their abilities in Maths, diverse competence levels, and questionably poor attendance related to the non-compulsory attendance requirement.

I will reflect on the approaches I took when planning and conducting tutorials in this discipline. I will discuss the importance of taking a student learning perspective when planning my teaching. I will elaborate on the value of seeking feedback on my teaching, and on the ways I have used to obtain such feedback. Finally, I will link selected ideas from the educational literature with my own teaching, and clarify my insights on the nature of academic workplaces, including teaching, both at King’s College London and beyond.

Key words: Tutorials, deep/surface learning, self-efficacy, expectations, effort

Critical account of the context of the Case Study
Chemistry with Biomedicine is a brand new degree programme in the School of Biomedical Sciences at King’s College London that was launched in the academic year 2012–2013. I am a new academic member of staff in the Department of Chemistry in the Biomedical School at Kings. I lecture maths and thermodynamics to first year undergraduates in two of the modules of this new degree programme.

Where to seek for guidelines?
About a year ago, I was assigned two subjects for which no prior teaching material existed. I had previously lectured and run tutorials on unrelated topics in the institution where I had worked before joining King’s College London. Before attending the Enhancing Academic Practice module, the primary and almost sole place I turned to seek information concerning teaching guidance and policy was the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC). The RSC is the largest non-government supporter of chemistry education in the UK [www.rsc.org]. Some of its activities encompass formal and informal education in schools and colleges, higher education and continuing professional development. It provides resources to assist lecturers in their teaching, and it seeks to influence the Government on issues related to chemical science education by commissioning reports to submit as evidence to Parliament and responding to consultations. In particular, for the topic of this case study, Maths for chemists, there is already a useful resource accessible online although unfortunately, one
can just get tips for teaching maths skills to ‘our future chemists’, that is, it mainly targets secondary education students [www.rsc.org/Education/EiC/topics/maths-for-chemists.asp]. While attending the Enhancing Academic Practice module, I have become aware of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) whose mission is to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education (HE). The QAA Benchmark statements [www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/] give some guidance on the Chemistry degree content but I found it rather general and permissive with surprisingly, no reference regarding Maths for chemists. The Department of Education [www.education.gov.uk] also provides statutory guidance and legislation and offers a very useful and comprehensive range of guides and reports. Likewise the aforementioned sites, I heard for the first time about the Higher Education Academy in the Enhancing Academic Practice module [www.heacademy.ac.uk/news/detail/2008/national_subject_profiles]. I have found these resources very informative and extremely helpful, and I am looking forward to reading on-going work on ‘Skills in Mathematics and Statistics in Chemistry and Tackling Transition’ which focuses on questions of interest regarding the mathematical and statistical skills in chemistry. There are many other documents available online that have been extremely enlightening, and I am very grateful for having been pointed out to these resources during the course.

What to teach?

The ‘Maths for Chemists’ module for first year undergraduate students enrolled in the Chemistry with Biomedicine programme took place in Semester one. The total number of chemistry students enrolled in the course was 19. A-level Maths was required for entry, as the mathematical ability of a student with only maths at GCSE level is a long way away from that of a student with A-level maths. However, an exception was made with two students coming from foundation courses, and inevitably, it turned out that these two students lacked basic mathematical skills, and required a different approach to draw out their thinking. Attendance was compulsory to lectures but not to tutorials. The original plan was that the Maths module would be delivered by the Physics department for practical reasons; we are only six core staff members in Chemistry in charge of delivering the entire undergraduate programme. In contrast, the tutorial would be delivered by me to reinforce the concepts and knowledge transmitted to the students in the lectures within a chemistry context, and to emphasize the importance of building motivation and confidence to apply essential parts of mathematics by embedding the maths within the chemistry context. This adds significant relevance to the tasks assigned.

Initially, I was informed that the new Chemistry programme had been designed in such a way that the Maths module would only amount to 15 credits, which I found insufficient. Therefore, I contacted 15 different departments of Chemistry in the UK to inquire about their practice in relation to the subject as I could not find any information online. It appears that students of Chemistry traditionally receive instruction in mathematics either through service courses offered in departments of Mathematics for students other than their own major students, or directly by lecturers in Chemistry. In some places, the students without A-level maths do a course which covers some basic algebra and introductory calculus while students with A-level maths refresh themselves on some of these basics via online exercises. Subsequently, all students do the same maths skills test, which follows a common compulsory
module with its corresponding assessment covering further topics. In places such as Oxford, chemistry students have in their first year 44 Maths lectures and 21 tutorials, and eight lectures and two workshops in their second year, and at the University of Edinburgh first year chemists have a 40 credit Maths module that is taught by the Maths department but every second tutorial is taken by a member of the Chemistry department, to help students put their maths knowledge into a chemical context. Overall, chemistry students at King’s will get 27 lectures and 10 tutorials at most, which in my view is scarce. What are the lecture topics and the minimum requirements in terms of topics to be taught? The answers to these questions also varied to a great extent from institution to institution.

**How can Maths be most effectively delivered to chemistry students?**

In what follows, I will critically reflect on the teaching strategies, the development of an effective learning environment and the tactics I have used this year to enhance the student experience drawing on personal anecdotes. To start with, the most difficult task that I faced this year was to tackle the absence of key knowledge that should have been acquired in secondary education, and the diversity in background knowledge in the class. This was obvious since my first contact with the students. I deliberately evaluated the mathematical level of the incoming students using a basic class questionnaire that I designed. It was not a test per se, as it did not carry any marks. The outcome was intended to inform me if the goals of the tutorials that students would be attending needed reassessment to achieve the final goal – fill gaps and exploit students’ strengths. Awareness of these facts was fundamental to establish sensible targets for the effective development of the course. In addition, I correlated the scores from this test with A-level and IB (International Baccalaureate) grades.

It has been reported that the size of the smallest groups in which the students learn is one of the most useful measures of quality in higher education (HE) (Gibbs, 2010). Thus, considering the limited number of people enrolled in the program, students had the opportunity to be taught in small groups and to receive individual attention. However, a couple of students were disappointed as being in larger classes with hundreds of students (where it would have been straightforward to choose colleagues and friends) was part of their expectation of being at university. Motivating students of mixed abilities and backgrounds was initially difficult. I tried different approaches using the results from the diagnosis test. Students were grouped depending on their ability, which they did not like very much, although some graciously took up their role of mentors. In the end, I let them freely choose with whom they would work. Albeit, I was well aware I had to be careful not to lose the good students through boredom, and the less experienced ones by moving too fast.

The development of a syllabus for a Maths module like this one is challenging, even more so in a degree where most students have a preference toward the biomedical aspect of the curriculum (14 out of the 19 students wanted to study Medicine or Dentistry in the first place but did not receive an offer). It was therefore essential that students appreciated earlier on in the course the relevance of this somehow ‘supplementary’ subject, appreciated the relationship between the core chemistry material and the mathematical tools and techniques, and more crucially, that they gained a feel for the underlying fundamental principles through their application. Linking concepts and ideas from across modules is paramount and key
during the curriculum design of a programme like this, still in its infancy. For the majority of students, a less crowded rather than more crowded curriculum might also increase their confidence and enjoyment.

Since the beginning, I was aware that I would face a challenging scenario, although not as challenging as the one that was finally presented to me. To motivate and generate an interest in the subject, I considered reviewing the material content of the course comparing some of the syllabus available to me from other institutions. I evaluated the academic level in the subject with that of the student intake having recognised their diverse intellectual level, and styles of learning, I adjusted the programme bearing in mind the relevance of the material topics. Above all, I took my time to think how I could generate interest and motivate the students, introducing tasks to engage them through the application of tools and real examples. Activities were designed to get them to think about chemistry in numerical terms, as they may not appreciate the need to acquire certain mathematical skills at first. The question I always had to be able to answer was: what is the point of doing this? Or in other words, what is the relevance of this topic in a chemistry context?

Knowledge of basic maths is an essential tool for all sciences, including chemistry. Most areas of chemistry require an ability to manipulate numbers and very simple equations, eg making up chemical solutions to the correct concentration, handling enzyme binding data, or carrying out statistical analyses on samples. Mathematical tools are also required to build models of varying degrees of complexity to provide insight and understanding of experimental data with ideally some predictive capability; there is always a certain inherent inaccuracy or variation in any measurement we make in the laboratory, and evaluation and combination of these experimental errors is required. In maths, time and effort invested in learning are rewarded by completing tasks and the usefulness of such learning improves in turn the motivation to learn. Like in sports or music, effort and determination are integral elements of success although students sometimes seem to be in denial about these facts.

Despite considering using clickers for my tutorials and producing some support via multimedia material, I ended up using conventional methods due to the lack of resources available to us. Although clickers offer an amount of trendiness that still appeals to students, I instead posed questions to the students, and they voted on the answers using coloured cards, a technique pioneered by Eric Mazur, Balkanski professor of Physics and Applied Physics at Harvard [http://mazur.harvard.edu/education/educationmenu.php]. Mazur is a source of inspiration to scientists and academics like me. Part of his research efforts has been dedicated to improve science education, and he has pioneered Peer Instruction, a method for teaching large lecture classes interactively (Crouch and Mazur, 2001; Mazur, 1997, 2009), which I will certainly try when the number of students on the chemistry degree increases.

However, the mix of activities I employed ranging from individual problem-solving, small group or pair work, to volunteer students resulted in students being active for much of the class, and ensured that they were engaged. It also encouraged some students to ask questions in order to fill gaps in their understanding. By undertaking work like this, as time progresses, students are required to apply and demonstrate their understanding of topics covered earlier
in the course. Besides, students were not only encouraged to learn actively but these exercises also provide an opportunity for the development of key skills such as communication, time management, group working and problem solving. The activities students enjoyed the most and hence boosted their desire to learn were those which lacked abstract concepts, or allowed the application of theoretical concepts into practice and those where there was an element of competition involved.

In order to feel confident and do my job as well as possible, I have to be on top of the subject matter, be well prepared, and make it clear to students what has to be done and understood, and why. I also have to use valid and reliable assessment methods and encourage students to actively participate in the class as well as supporting them in challenging situations. These challenging situations tended to coincide with periods around summative or formative assessments. I constantly emphasised the importance of ‘deep learning’ rather than the ‘surface/strategic’ approach they usually adopt to pass exams and to obtain high grades. I firmly agree with Biggs’ definition of good teaching as the encouragement of a deep approach to learning (Biggs, 1999). I used a variety of formative assessment strategies, involving ‘low (or no) stakes’ marking, both in-class and in the form of homework. Students appeared to enjoy the small group/pair work that followed the test and this was a nice, safe way for them to check their work and to offer or receive help in understanding. One frequent complaint I had was that I did not give a precise mark, a score, to the tutorial work. My intention is/was to make students realise that the tutorial work is there for their benefit and to give me feedback as to which topics they find easy or difficult and above all to suppress their fear of being incorrect because once this has been achieved, the atmosphere relaxes and learning starts to become more enjoyable. Needless to say that some students are not really up to the task, and whatever we do, their lack of interest surpasses. I prefer to grant them all the benefit of the doubt, and in many cases, I discover myself working with students who exceed my first impression and expectations by far, which is very rewarding.

Getting individual students to volunteer to show their workings on the whiteboard also allowed me to talk through the key learning points, and to correct if necessary and give explanations. Unfortunately, at the expense of students getting weekly formative assessment much of my time was used up by marking. This would not be a realistic strategy if the number of students were to increase in future years. I discussed various possibilities to tackle this issue with the people coming to my observations. One thing I could do is to hand out a ‘script’ with the correct answers, including the workings with indications of where marks would be awarded. It seems there is empirical evidence suggesting that model answers can be better than traditional written feedback to students (Huxham, 2007). We also discussed peer assessment. I personally have not tried peer assessment before but I will certainly implement this technique in the class next year. Orsmond (2004) discusses self- and peer-assessment in the Teaching Bioscience Enhancing Learning Series published by the UK Centre for Bioscience. He considers in detail how we can get started and describes specific issues related to the effective design, implementation and evaluation of self- and peer-assessment, such as the central role played by students engaging with marking criteria. I share his views that it can be a powerful learning tool in getting students to understand the assessment criteria. I agree that it is important when asking students to mark work, that we also ask them to provide
written comments, as getting students to justify marks in writing is likely to help their learning in a number of ways (Orsmond, 2004). In addition, giving feedback to other people may make students question their own work (Cartney, 2010). It is well documented that small classes like the ones I am dealing with are easy to manage (Langan, 2011), therefore the issue that I should consider carefully is perhaps when to use self-assessment, peer assessment, or both. In ‘Redesigning a difficult statistics course’, Langan (2011) presents a situation very similar to the one I have experienced this year, and in my view, the pros that he describes override the cons when a well designed and managed peer-assessment system, applied to a subject area such as Maths (for chemists) is considered.

Another issue we all have to deal with is the fact that students should understand that university teaching is not about mere instruction, but that it is about thinking for themselves and about intellectual creativity, about taking an active rather than a passive role in the process of learning. Students are constantly pre-occupied with exams rather than learning, and there is pressure to prepare students for exams and to feed them with information rather than to infuse into them an attitude to explore ideas. To this end, it was suggested that it may be worth discussing with students issues related to deep and surface learning, as surface learners may not be aware that that is what they are doing. Maths is a subject that builds on earlier material and many students when they get stuck with a problem at an early stage become discouraged. Effective learning requires that the student engage with the process of learning in a proactive way, and for that not just motivation is needed but also self-confidence. The subject demands a substantial component of independent learning that is an active rather than a passive approach to learning either through private study, collaborative work with colleagues, or discussion with the tutor and others. And simply, in my own words: ‘Practice, practice, practice’. There is an ample choice of textbooks to help with it, but The Chemistry Maths Book (Steiner, 2008) should be on the bookshelf of every chemistry student. The book provides a complete course companion suitable for students at all levels. Students particularly praise the extensive use of examples illustrating every important concept and method, and the detailed applications of the mathematics in chemistry and several basic concepts in physics. The exercises at the end of each chapter have been designed to give students a working understanding of the material in the text and are the highlight.

Something to be considered is the social value and the popular image of the subject. Personally, I cannot help being surprised when I witness people who shamelessly profess their inability for Maths. According to some research (Epstein et al. 2010; Moreau et al. 2010), the image of mathematicians as nerds, odd or eccentric people discourages young people from studying the subject or using maths in life. Certainly, a number of my students had rather unhelpful feelings about the subject and more crucially about their abilities in Maths. I had not come across work on self-efficacy in this context, Bandura’s work (1994) on self-efficacy, or Dweck’s (1975) on ‘learned helplessness’. However, in fact, there are several things that I had been doing which are helpful, not least of which is the ‘low-stakes’, formative assessment that forms such an important part of the teaching and learning approach and which is advocated by Knight and Yorke (2003, 2004). I agree with this theory in that there are two kinds of students, firstly those with a malleable self-belief in the possibility of personal growth, implying that mistakes committed in academic exercises and other evidence of weaknesses
are opportunities for learning, and secondly those who possess a ‘fixed’ self-belief, who seem
to believe that their abilities are ‘fixed’, so the mistakes they make serve merely as evidence
to confirm that they are ‘no good’ and, as a result, it is harder for them to learn. The latter
category of students thus finds it harder to learn, and to a certain extent such students may
also be especially prone to adopting surface and strategic learning approaches.

After careful reflection, I decided I would not discuss these things with the students in the
lectures or tutorials but instead I would raise these issues in the one-to-one personal tutorials
that I organized at least twice a semester. It might help student’s developments if they become
aware of the way they do things and behave. It is also well documented that some students
suffer from Maths anxiety and that this influences their academic performance on maths
tasks (Sheffield and Hunt, 2007). Sheffield and Hunt suggest that the key to mitigating this
condition is to explain carefully what the assessment involves before focussing on performance
(Sheffield and Hunt, 2007). They also describe something that I have clearly experienced this
year; anxious students avoid certain classes which then has an impact on the learning process.
There is also ongoing evidence about the importance of students’ attitudes to Maths and their
beliefs in relation to performance (Ernest, 1989), which I have experienced is a key element.

Poor attendance was sometimes an issue as the tutorials run on Friday early mornings from
9:00 to 10:00. Communicating with non-attendees was at times challenging but important.
I proposed to make the Maths tutorials compulsory next year in that if the students miss
too many they are chased up, but if they miss one they will not fail the course. However,
I was advised by the academic centre not to do it for various strategic reasons. Personally,
I believe that a minimal reward for those students who usually come to tutorials that are
not compulsory should be perhaps considered. It might potentially be an incentive to
other students who find turning up more challenging.

At the end of this course, the student would have been (should have been) able to:
(1) read, interpret and solve a given problem using appropriate mathematical terminology;
(2) organize and present information and data in tabular, graphical and/or diagrammatic
forms; (3) use appropriate notation and terminology; (4) formulate a mathematical argument
and communicate it clearly; (5) identify and select appropriate mathematical strategies
and techniques; (6) demonstrate an understanding of both the significance and the
reasonableness of results; (7) recognize patterns and structures in a variety of situations, and
make generalizations; and (8) recognize and demonstrate an understanding of the practical
applications of mathematics. The majority of the students passed the final exam, with the
exception of four: the two students coming from foundation courses, one student who failed
all the first year modules, and a fourth student who experienced complicated personal
circumstances. Overall, four students achieved a first class – and these results correlate
with attendance.

Feedback: taking a student learning perspective when planning my teaching
My own experience as a learner clearly influences my teaching practice, but it is obvious
that what might have been appropriate for me, might not be for others. Therefore feedback
is essential not only for the students, but also for me, the lecturer, so that I take immediate
action to adapt and improve students’ learning. To this end, I usually carried out a quick questionnaire at the end of the tutorial asking: (i) What have you enjoyed the most? (ii) What have you enjoyed the least? (iii) What new thing/s have you learnt?, (iv) Is there anything you still do not understand/is not clear from today’s lecture?. I found this to be a simple and effective way to invite students to provide examples to support their comments and evaluation. I could also process the feedback quickly and frequently, considering the numbers of students I was working with. The questionnaires were anonymous but some students happily disclosed their identities, and this was the norm by the end of the course. The technique becomes especially powerful if I summarise their feedback and describe what actions have been taken in response to them as suggested by Light et al (2009). This is somehow similar to what we were requested to do in one of the Enhance Academic Practice sessions, and that I had subsequently implemented: (i) what would you like me to stop doing? (ii) what would you like me to start doing?, (iii) what do you want me to continue doing? The differences lie in that the post-it notes were displayed for everyone to read and the students’ answers were related to the setting of the classroom, hand-outs or timetable (eg start the class at 9:10 rather than 9:05!) rather than the content, material or the method.

I recognise the need for a continuous evaluation of my approach to maintain and improve support to students in their learning and in order to enhance their experience. The advent of new technologies, elearning and online assessments, and the rapid development of tools to aid teaching and learning constitute a significant and unprecedented opportunity in the field of education (Seery and McDonnell, 2013). An area I ought to explore in this context is the use of technology for personalised learning, see eg www.personalizelearning.com/2012/12/10-predictions-for-personalized.html, which I believe is a key strategy to improving student engagement and academic achievement. As shown in ‘Personalised learning: lessons to be learnt’ (Prain, 2012), its application to the mathematics curriculum has already proved to be a success.

My own reflective practice
During this module, I undertook a microteaching session with two other participants from the Medical School, and two observations of teaching in practice. One of them was with a member of staff from Pharmacy who teaches similar topics to the ones I teach in Chemistry. The second observation was with an academic from King’s Learning Institute. I am very grateful to all of them for having taken the time to come and observe my sessions. I very much enjoyed the observations, especially, the discussions that followed the session. The advice I received was invaluable and very enlightening. I was given lots of tips and background information on various topics which I have highly appreciated. I have already put some of this advice into practice in subsequent sessions.

Palfreyman (2008) defines Higher Education as ‘the development of critical-thinking through the process of liberal education’. He believes ‘Higher Education is not ‘schooling’ for adults’. I subscribe to this definition despite the fact it seemingly disputes the attitude of showing empathy toward students’ feelings, giving students positive feedback and encouraging them to note their own achievements. The staff-student ratio is rapidly increasing, and students are progressively denied the chance of engaging in academic discourse. This translates in less
contact hours, less assessment, and decreasing chances for students to properly engage in scholarly life. Students are also steadily regarded as ’consumers’ in the context of increasing tuition fees. In spite of the shrinkage in public funds and the rise in fees, the university should remain a place where students are educated for free and where they engage in the process of discovery, where they learn to think independently respecting the point of view of others and expect their thinking to be questioned by others too.

The nature of the academic workplace, including teaching, is very different between King’s College London and my previous institution. Having spent the previous ten years of my career at Oxford University, what I have missed the most this year is their unique tutorial system (Palfreyman, 2008). This method is in my view, the key for the academic success of Oxford undergraduates. Quoting Reeves (1968):

‘There is no substitute for the individual tutorial, either single or in pairs. Its function is not to instruct: it is to set the student the task of expressing his thought articulately and to assist him in subjecting his creation to critical examination and reconstructing it. The charge of spoon-feeding so often levelled against the tutorial method implies a complete misunderstanding of its function.’

In ’Farewell, Lecture?’ Mazu (2009) states:

‘I have begun to turn this traditional information-transfer model of education upside down. The responsibility for gathering information now rests squarely on the shoulders of the students. They must read material before coming to class, so that class time can be devoted to discussions, peer interactions, and time to assimilate and think. Instead of teaching by telling, I am teaching by questioning.’

In the absence of a tutorial system (or even if there was one in place), this seems an interesting alternative. This year, some students complained because I did not distribute hand-outs prior to the lectures/tutorials. After reading the works by Mazur, I am going to follow his example and ‘rather than lecturing, I am going to make them prepare themselves for class and in-class, rather than telling them things, I am going to ask them questions.’ I will probably get the generic complaint Mazur received, that is, ‘they (the students) have to do all the learning themselves’, but it will be worth trying.

Like in Oxford, not all my students at King’s had enquiring minds and genuine curiosity about facts at the beginning of this academic year. However, increasingly, they started asking questions and becoming engaged in, at times, stimulating discussions. I also succeeded when students demonstrated they had really absorbed what they had been taught in Maths when faced with mathematical analysis in the middle of a lecture of for example thermodynamics, the other topic I lecture. Making students work hard all year round, and witnessing them becoming confident (or relatively confident), and reaching their full potential is a real pleasure and a privilege. Lecturing and giving tutorials also allows me to convey my enthusiasm and excitement about my own discipline, and foster intellectual curiosity and the search for answers. I am a chemist by training, my research area is in computational biophysics, but
I have always liked to think that lecturing will always be a work in progress and one of the largest and longest experiments I will ever perform in my academic career.

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**References**


Pride and prejudice in teaching and learning mathematics (case study)

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Abstract
If mathematics were a person, every student and lecturer would have something to tell her: her reputation precedes her. Generally speaking, mathematics is the recipient of severe prejudices and excessive praises.

In this paper, I will present some reflections on teaching and learning in higher education based on my experience gained as student and tutor. I will analyse the teaching and learning of mathematics in higher education using a dichotomic structure, similar to the one proposed by Marton and Säljö (1976a). The deep and surface approaches identified in their article will be replaced by approaches led by pride and prejudice. The influence of a biased approach in teaching and learning mathematics will be discussed. Finally, after concluding, I will propose some recommendations for the future enhancement of practice.

Key words: Mathematics, deep, surface, teaching, learning

Introduction
Mathematics is universally considered as one of the most difficult disciplines to learn and teach. It is often the recipient of severe prejudices and excessive praises. A wide range of recent literature and research tries to deal with the anxiety and predisposition of students towards the scientific discipline par excellence. Fenemma and Sherman (1976) proposed the following nine ‘Mathematics Attitudes Scales’ (usually denoted as FSMAS, to measure attitudes toward learning mathematics:

• The Attitude toward Success in Mathematics Scale;
• The Mathematics as a Male Domain Scale;
• The Mother Scale;
• The Father Scale;
• The Teacher Scale;
• The Confidence in Learning Mathematics Scale;
• The Mathematics Anxiety Scale;
• The Effectance Motivation Scale in Mathematics;
• The Mathematics Usefulness Scale.

In a study on mathematics and anxiety, Ray (1990) made two key conclusions. Firstly, he found that ‘mathematics anxiety seems to be a learned condition more behavioural than cognitive in nature’. Secondly, ‘treatment can restore the performance of formerly high-anxious students to the performance level associated with low mathematics anxiety’.
Since 2008, I have had the chance to be a tutor and teacher in mathematics in higher education. My main duties have been teaching basic notions of mathematical analysis – such as limits, derivatives and integrals – and help students to solve exercises from past exam papers or assignments. In my role, I am confronted with mathematics anxiety and predisposition on a regular basis.

The principal goal of a tutor or a lecturer is to deliver the course material effectively to the class. In order to deal with mathematics anxiety and the predisposition of students, the learning and teaching styles have a central role in the practice. The main question to answer is: ‘How do students approach learning and how does this relate with the teaching style of the lecturer?’ These two aspects are not independent. In fact, teaching and learning interact and influence each other and therefore must always be analysed together. Usually more importance is given to adjusting the latter rather than the former. In other words, it is often the lecturer who is expected to adapt his or her style to the students’ necessities, although learners do adjust their learning techniques to the teacher’s style.

The first concern is to analyse the learning approach to mathematics. This is the cornerstone of the subsequent learning process. In my experience, pride and prejudice mark the boundaries of the wide range of predispositions of students towards mathematics. These two boundaries replicate the bipolar structure proposed by Marton and Säljö (1976a) of surface and deep learners.

The word ‘prejudice’ serves to emphasize the scepticism towards the abstract science that mathematics is. It constitutes a sense of uneasiness that is not necessarily negative: It could be compared to, for example, the feeling of deep respect in front of an important professor in your study field. By ‘pride’, in contrast, I want to evoke the more confident and relaxed approach of some individuals. Again, I do not want to label it as necessarily good, just like the feeling of superiority when spotting a mistake made by a colleague isn’t necessarily good.

Attempts to categorize students in mathematics according to the categories of deep and surface learners proposed by Marton and Säljö have already been made. For example, Crawford et al. (1994) tested classes against a dichotomic structure generated by a ‘fragmented category – reproduction intention’ and a ‘cohesive category – understanding intention.’ There also exists some literature on how to group teachers in mathematics. For example Ernest (1989) proposes an evolution of the role through three categories: ‘instrumentalists’ (comparable to surface approach), ‘Platonists’ (surface and deep) and ‘problem solvers’ (deep).

In this paper, I will first present the structure subtended to the pride and prejudice dichotomy. Then, I will model this structure onto learning and teaching mathematics and discuss the implications of this. In conclusion, I will propose some recommendations for the future enhancement of practice.

**Pride and prejudice in learning**

In ‘An essay concerning human understanding’ (1690), Locke first introduced his concept of ‘tabula rasa’, literally blank table. Describing the concept, he suggested we are all born into
this world as blank tables: ‘If we will attentively consider new born children, we shall have little reason to think that they bring many ideas into the world with them’.

In line with Locke’s views, children, less exposed to both positive and negative comments to mathematics, very often approach it with enthusiasm. Solving a mathematical problem gives them a feeling of achievement and satisfaction. Once children become students, and their mathematics education goes beyond the level of parental knowledge, they often lack the guidance necessary to fuel their enthusiasm. Rockliffe’s (2001) research ‘revealed an overall trend of decreasing levels of parental involvement, both at home and in school as classroom volunteers, as children moved up through the grades of Elementary school.’ This is not completely surprising. ‘Indeed, anecdotally, both teachers and parents had predicted this general pattern and similar patterns of involvement have been recorded by Epstein and Dauber (1991), Merttens and Vass (1990).’ In other words, as they move up in their education, learners have to face a new stage of education where human support on the subject can usually only be obtained through teachers, tutors and other professionals. Predisposition factors measured through FSMAS come into play at this point. The students cannot be considered any longer a ‘tabula rasa’: their past relationship with mathematics and the level of usefulness to achieve future goals have affected their approach to the discipline. Of course this approach is unique, like any feature that attains to the human gender. Nevertheless, through my past experience, two main categories can be identified. Marton and Säljö based their structure on the concepts of good (deep learner) and evil (surface learner), with some minor adjustments: ‘This is not to say that it is a bad thing to require multi-structural (surface, editor’s note) responding in certain contexts in higher education, but simply that teacher, and students, need to be aware of what the requirements are’ (Biggs, 1979). According to them, any class is divided into two counterpoising forces, where one (deep learners) has to be preferred over the other (surface learner). The group of surface learners must be redirected ‘by ensuring that the assessment procedures demand deep-level processing’ (Marton and Säljö, 1976b).

I believe that in mathematics a priori beliefs give origin to a more interesting division of the class. Based on personal observation and experience, I am able to sort the students according to their bias to the discipline and I can distinguish two categories: those who are led through learning by prejudice towards the subject (Group A) and those whose leading force is pride (Group B). At first sight, one can think to identify the surface approach with prejudice and the deep approach with pride. However, a careful description of learners from group A and group B will help to demonstrate how these two groups contain both deep and surface learners. I will now clarify the two categories in more detail.

Generally speaking, Group A individuals exercise caution towards the discipline and have at least one reason for judging mathematics negatively. In this group, mathematics generates a sense of uneasiness. Scarpello (2005) says: ‘Many people believe that learning mathematics is not only useless but a painful experience that is courageously endured.’ In this category, there are two subgroups based on the source of their judgment.

The first subgroup is made up of those who build their opinion on exterior sources, in particular on the consumerist culture, using pragmatism and exterior/social judgment.
Sentences describing this group are:

- Mathematics is useless, hard and meaningless;
- People in mathematics do not have a good social reputation.

The second subgroup consists of those basing their impression of the subject on interior sources:

- I am not intelligent enough;
- Mathematics is a dry and sterile subject.

Conversely, Group B individuals have as a common denominator an extreme easiness with regard to the subject. There are no hidden secrets or obstacles to fear. Their approach might be enthusiastic or presumptuous: mathematics is a way to distinguish themselves and excel among the others. Once again we can subdivide this category according to what inspires learners’ opinions.

Those who are driven by exterior sources recognize themselves in sentences like:

- Mathematics is an excellent tool to obtain my dream job;
- People in mathematics are well considered.

Learners in Group B who are driven by interior sources are those who believe that mathematics is a way to obtain benefits:

- If I can understand advanced mathematics, it means I am intelligent;
- Mathematics is an exercise of the mind, originating mental agility and flexibility.

This bipolar structure of Group B is somehow similar to the one mentioned in ‘Mathematics: beautiful or useful?’ by Ngoc (2012): ‘Some mathematical researchers are well rewarded for their efforts. However, is that the reason that motivates all these famous mathematicians? Is that all? Is it just because mathematics is ‘useful’ or it pays well? Is there anything more? [...], we cannot ever ignore the beauty of mathematics which captures and obsesses many mathematicians.’

This division leads to a new vision of the class that has the following benefits. Firstly, there are no more students (deep learners) that, up to some minor corrections, do not have to make any progress. Boredom coming from solving similar exercises and satisfaction derived from good grades obtained without effort constitute a friction for mathematics students. As in a car you need to accelerate to maintain the same speed because of friction, students need to be constantly challenged. This can be done by posing them new problems they can solve with a reasonable effort because of the mathematical tools they have.

Secondly, surface learners no longer feel like outcasts in the class. Very often the negative beliefs on the subject common in this group arise because of the feeling of having a wrong
approach while others naturally have the right one. The need of progress in everyone, demonstrated in a lecture, is perceived as a general rule and not just for those who have low grades or adopt a surface approach.

Finally, this alternative view allows the teacher to no longer see the class as consisting of two parts, but as a unique group that needs to progress as a whole. Rather than considering individual needs of each student, it is important to create lectures that address the auditorium at large – of course, still being conscious of individual needs. In general, quality must be given priority over quantity. In a tutorial, for example, going through all the details of a solution of an exercise on the board and making students aware of the importance of writing in a concise and formal manner is by far more important and profitable for students than solving many exercises with much speaking and little writing. This method guarantees benefits for both Group A, eg understanding the logic behind an exercise, and Group B, eg learning to write details and express their solutions in a formal way.

In conclusion, this dichotomic view allows one to perceive the class in a more objective and unbiased way, a way that goes beyond the traditional distinction of good and bad students. Students are all lacking some skills and they all need to progress, maybe in something different.

**Pride and prejudice in teaching**

Rockcliffe (2001) categorizes teachers as

- ‘Math Evaders’: ‘They lacked confidence in their own ability to manipulate numbers and harbored a deep dislike of the subject. This lacked confidence in their ability to support their children’s learning in mathematics’.
- ‘Math Achievers’: ‘They manipulate numbers and the pleasure and enjoyment they get from solving a problem. They exhibited confidence in their ability to support their children’s mathematical learning.

Like Rockcliffe, I will identify two main teaching styles, like I did for learning styles. Pride and prejudice towards mathematics result in teaching styles and approaches ranging respectively from minimal and concise to pompous and detailed. Again it is important to notice that this division is not subtended to a good/evil structure: positive and negative elements can be identified in both approaches.

Now, I will illustrate in detail the distinguishing feature of each group. First, I will analyse the group of education professionals led by prejudice. This group characterizes itself for the uneasiness in teaching the subject. Some aspects related to this uneasiness are the following:

- Unfamiliarity or insecurity with the topic to be taught;
- Teaching is very detailed and carefully planned;
- Great importance is given to students’ feedback.

Here it is easy to notice that the characteristics of this group, as long as they’re not taken to the extreme, are actually positive. Some unfamiliarity with the topic might even be useful.
In fact, because of that, one can find himself or herself facing the same difficulties that the students have to deal with and this new perspective often helps the lecturer deliver the material more clearly to the class. The main issue is when a teacher is overly affected by his or her insecurities and lets them get in the way of their teaching. As a result, lectures and tutorials might end up being unclear, badly structured or boring.

In the second group, led by pride, teachers and lecturers share aspects like:

- Familiarity and confidence in the material to be taught;
- Teaching is essential and improvised;
- Limited consideration to students, their needs and issues.

Considerations similar to the ones of the previous case can be drawn. Essential and improvised teaching can be as effective as carefully planned teaching, especially if one is an expert in the subject. In addition, these can lead to a less static and more involved class. Even giving limited importance to students’ feedback sometimes might be useful to focus more on the material and its delivery. On the flip side, taking the three features typical of this second group to the extreme, one might end up with a disastrous result. Lectures and tutorials might turn out to be confusing and obscure. A lack of interest from the students might result in bad exam scores and lead them to drop the class.

Similar to the learning case, I have noticed that the division of the teaching approach in two groups is not based on a good/evil consideration as in the vision originated by Marton and Säljö: ‘The first step in improving teaching, then, is to avoid those factors that encourage a surface approach’ (Biggs and Tang, 2011). Effective teaching can be achieved in many different fashions. The golden rule I can infer from what has been mentioned is that the teacher should not take to the extreme any of their distinctive features in teaching since this is very likely to cause problems. In particular, an excess of prejudice might easily lead to oversimplified classes. In this case, in a traditional lecture on the blackboard or whiteboard, teachers have the tendency to go through an exasperating amount of detail very slowly. They look continuously for approval about the correctness of the material explained and for signs of comprehension among learners. The class ends up fragmented and is hard to follow for its dullness. On the other hand, an excess of pride leads to overcomplicated classes. Students are not able to follow the discussion because of bad communication skills of the teacher, lack of organization in the presentation of the topic or wrong pitch in regards to the audience, like a too advanced problem or too technical speech.

Moreover, I have noticed that teaching mathematics does not follow the ‘in medio stat virtus’ rule. Delivering mathematics properly is a matter of dealing with an oxymoron, two clashing and opposite aspects must coexist:

- One should teach a subject in which they are an expert with an insecure method;
- Teaching a detailed, planned class while improvising;
- Being detached when considering students’ issues and needs.
This idea is closely related to one of the conclusions in the paper by Ramsden (1993): ‘an approach that brings formal and informal theories of teaching into a productive relationship that will lead to improvements in quality’.

Another related aspect is the importance of the ‘gut instinct’ in teaching mathematics. Notwithstanding the class of teachers one belongs to, it is fundamental to acquire the ability to assess the situation you have to deal with whilst taking into consideration all the aspects you have to deal with: material to be taught, size and type of audience, etc. Above all, it is important to give each the right weight and consideration. This is solely a matter of experience. The presence of such an uncontrollable and down-to-earth aspect is fascinating and challenging in an abstract and rational subject such as mathematics.

Finally, I would like to spend some words on evaluations and feedback from students, peers and more experienced lecturers. The main concern for the ‘pride group’ of teachers is exclusively on the material and contents of classes. They tend to disregard direct or indirect feedback from anybody. This is probably due to a strong overconfidence and easiness in class that sometimes has negative consequences especially on a social level: they develop a poor and sometimes even conflicting relationship with students.

As for the ‘prejudice group’, teachers are extremely social and affable. The content of their classes or tutorials is not a priority anymore. The result is a class of happy but averagely or poorly prepared students. This group usually obtains good evaluation forms, but the students might have learnt more with additional emphasis on the contents rather than the social side.

The main goal is to actively accept critique and feedback. Lecturers must critically analyse all the comments on their teaching, judge them carefully and decide which improvements to implement. Evaluation is a double-edged sword: it must be handled with extreme care.

I can conclude similarly as I did in the section on learning. The dichotomic structure presented is not made of two opposing parts. All teachers, notwithstanding their approach, need to progress in some aspect. It is therefore important to take consciousness of the approach used in teaching into account.

**Highlights of this new view**

In this section, I will highlight some aspects of learning and teaching that derive from a ‘pride and prejudice’ view. These will serve as the platform for the next section. In fact, starting from the following considerations, I will propose some techniques for enhancing practice.

The first important feature, already mentioned above, is the shift from a dichotomic view originating from surface versus deep learners into a more uniform and comprehensive view. The class is perceived from the lecturer in its entirety and one that needs to progress. This results in a more encouraging approach of teachers to learners. In fact, lecturers are no longer in the position of having to balance two radically different components; they can interact more uniformly and therefore more effectively. Moreover, the new approach of teachers makes it possible to establish a steadier and more relaxed approach of students to mathematics. This
means that teachers will feel less inclination towards the ‘good students’ and put less pressure on ‘bad students’. This will lead to a more equal consideration of all individuals and should hopefully lead to a less anxious, less competitive and more cooperative environment with obvious benefits.

Another important phenomenon arising from considering learners and teachers divided in a prejudice and pride group is the possibility to move from one group to the other. This possibility of shifting from Group A to Group B is intuitive: with time, experience, motivation and teachers’ guidance, the uneasiness typical of Group A can turn into confidence. The opposite switch, from pride to prejudice, might be observed in more pessimistic individuals. In this scenario, obstacles and difficulties hard to solve might result in a loss of confidence in their skills and trust in the subject. A similar phenomenon is identified by proponents of the deep/surface dichotomy: ‘Although it is clear that the same student may use both deep and surface approaches on different occasions, there was evidence from the interviews that students also showed general orientations to studying. These general tendencies to adopt particular approaches to learning have been found to be associated with characteristic forms of motivation and attitudes to studying’ (Ramsden, 1997).

Finally, I will discuss extremes of the ‘pride and prejudice conception’. I have already observed that since this is not a good/evil scheme, the goal is not answering the question ‘how to move teachers or students from the evil to the good group?’ The issue to solve is ‘how to make the most of each teacher or student as he or she is?’ In fact, although some extremes must be avoided, the individual characteristics (confidence, insecurity, etc.) of each person, within certain boundaries, are a resource and are functional to achieve good results for both teaching and learning mathematics. Virtue does not stand in the middle, but stands in the possession of different and contrasting skills and especially in the ability to make them coexist. Both in teaching and learning, this expertise lies in experience and good role models. This process is slow and demands time.

I would like to conclude with the following quote from Crawfrod et al. (1998): ‘students who hold different conceptions of mathematics adopt different approaches to learning it, perceive their learning environment in different ways and achieve at different levels.’ The same is also true for teachers in regards to teaching.

**Enhancing practice**

So far, I have developed a theory, but the more interesting part is how to apply this to practice. I will start by pointing out some common and popular ways to enhance practice.

First of all, I have noticed that a widespread idea is to apply the latest technological tools to try to change methods of learning and teaching mathematics. Newspaper articles confirm this. In the Guardian, Hoare (2003) says, ‘New ICT applications can take the pain out of calculation and free pupils to move on to more advanced and more exciting maths quicker’.

Another common tendency is to create schemes and structures to hold up teaching and learning. A solid studying or teaching method is considered essential to obtain a good result.
Many pre-arranged plans and bullet points are available on specialised literature. For example, Cox (2003) proposes the following list of aspects to take into consideration for teaching. Notice the acronym of the word MATHEMATICS that he proposes:

- Mathematical content;
- Aims and objectives of the curriculum;
- Teaching and learning activities to meet the aims and objectives;
- Help to be provided to the students – support and guidance;
- Evaluation, management and administration of the curriculum and its delivery;
- Materials to support the curriculum;
- Assessment of the students;
- Time considerations and scheduling;
- Initial position of the students – where we are starting from;
- Coherence of the curriculum – how the different components fit together;
- Students.

In addition, universities increasingly offer support facilities, such as dedicated learning centres and pop-in tutorials, where students have access to any kind of resources that can help solve their mathematical problems.

Finally, teamwork is highly emphasised and promoted. Lecturers frequently ask their tutors or teaching assistants to organise tutorials and quiz sessions in small groups. Furthermore, home assignments are sometimes given in the form of a collaborative project assigned to a group of students. The idea is that knowledge itself is rigid and needs to be made flexible by group work. Blignaut and Venter (1998) describe the reasons and benefits of cooperation as follows: ‘Students need to acquire life-long skills (taken from a list by Denning, 1993) such as: an awareness of need to function in the internationally networked world, skills in communication both oral and written, ability to work productively in teams and flexibility and adaptability in the job market.’

ICT applications, planning and teamwork are important and useful tools in teaching and learning mathematics. Nonetheless, the peculiarity of mathematics as a subject and the ‘pride and prejudice’ analysis above suggest that use of these three resources is not always appropriate or sufficient. I will now go deeper into this matter.

As Hoare says, the main priority, now that every student can have access to a powerful computer or calculator, of education professionals in mathematics is to ‘move on to more advanced and more exciting maths quicker’ and to ‘take the pain out of calculation.’ This applies both to the group of students led by pride and the one led by prejudice. I think that the ‘pain of calculation’ is not necessarily a negative aspect. This comes usually after the ‘pain of reasoning’. I omit the discussion about the origin of this negative classification, especially regarding calculation, since it can be thoroughly discussed for a long time. These kinds of ‘pains’ are fundamental for shaping a good student and teaching them values, such as mental discipline and hard work, which go beyond mathematical knowledge. Eventually, if the effort is handled correctly, the ‘pain’ will turn in a pleasure and a resource. This process is slow and
requests a considerable amount of time, but will lead to more solid and durable results. To achieve this, it is important to design balanced activities. A good assignment sheet is a mixture of exercises requiring calculations and demanding reasoning. It is important not to take away the ‘joy of thinking’ as well as the ‘joy of solving.’ Solving a problem should not be praised as a special result, typical of the attitude of Group A teachers, or diminished somehow, typical of Group B teachers. A serious and detached behaviour must be held at all times.

The detachment of a lecturer or a tutor is another fundamental aspect to stress in order to enhance practice. This is closely connected to the formative role that a math teacher has in class. Learners very often cast their anxieties and prejudices (Group A) or confidence and pride (Group B) upon their teacher. The lecturer therefore sometimes finds themselves praised or demonized with reasons independent of the teaching. It is important therefore to let some of these feelings pass and remain faithful to the teaching method adopted. When things calm down, the teaching method can be assessed based on the results obtained, personal considerations, and students’ feedback. The changes I found to be most effective were eliminating frills and extreme practices such as detailed planning, extensive use of media, long homework and lack of communication. Plain teaching on the blackboard and asking questions by raising the hand are often more effective and appreciated. Teamwork must also not be abused. Individual learning is not rigid and acquiring a solid knowledge of the discipline is an essential step to make before approaching teamwork. In conclusion, I think it is important to rediscover the simplicity of teaching and learning by eliminating useless and sometimes damaging techniques to entertain or maintain distance from the students.

Finally a more unbiased approach to mathematics must be encouraged in teaching and learning, especially to those who start to teach and learn mathematics. I will analyse the problems connected to the extremes of the ‘pride and prejudice view’. It is human and not possible to eliminate the a priori approach to mathematics, but dangerous extremes must be avoided. Some techniques to obtain a more unbiased approach and a spirit of openness towards mathematics could be the following.

First of all, parents of children at primary school must be made aware of the dangers connected to an excessive praise or demonization of mathematics. Schools should encourage participation in seminars and to refresh basic mathematical notions. This would allow parents not only to help their children to solve difficulties in their homework, but also to help them in the right way. This idea constitutes the fundamental brick for a long-term plan in the direction of a more mathematically open-minded society.

Secondly, students in higher education should have access to alumni who were in the same course not long before. Sharing some time with them will allow current students to talk about their issues. More importantly, it will give learners a concrete view of mathematics and its human element to oppose the abstract and virtual idea created by stereotypes and a priori beliefs.

Finally, colleagues from the same departments and experts from education departments should be sent to observe lecturers and tutors in class. They should pay particular attention
to the approach used by those leading the class. Very often, in fact, the pride or prejudice
dichotomy is not perceived, it is a subconscious aspect of the personality and it needs an
external observer to spot it.

In conclusion, the main recommendations for enhancing practice are the simplification of
teaching methods and the encouragement of a more unbiased approach to mathematics.

Conclusions and further developments
A priori beliefs constitute a fundamental criterion to assess learners and teachers in
mathematics. This criterion gives origin to two subgroups, one led by pride and the other
by prejudice. Notwithstanding this bipolar partition, this vision allows us to overcome the
traditional scheme of good and bad students and teachers and to see the students and the
teachers as whole that needs to progress. This will help to solve common problems in teaching
and learning mathematics. We must be aware of this unavoidable biased approach and try to
keep it within certain boundaries so that it can be a resource.

To end with, I would like to raise some questions that arise and that would be worthy of
further investigation:

• Is this scheme applicable to other scientific or humanistic disciplines?
• Does a more unbiased approach to mathematics lead to less anxiety and
  higher performance?
• How could we categorize objectively an individual (teacher/learner) as led by pride
  or by prejudice?
• What is the precise relationship between surface/deep learners and pride/prejudice
  led learners?

Appendix A – Evaluation form
We propose here two examples of comments taken from an evaluation of the same class.
We notice the following features:

• The question regarding the pace/speed of the lecture is the most interesting. There are two
  completely different perceptions of the same lecture.
• The ‘Pride approach’, recognizable by comments like ‘focus more on problem solving
  strategies and proof techniques than details that can be worked up from lecture notes
  easily’, is characterised by the perception of slowness.
• The ‘Prejudice approach’, recognizable by comments like ‘time is too short to go through
  problems’, is characterised by the perception of a fast pace.
Informal Evaluation Form – Analysis I Tutoring

Please give an answer to the following questions concerning tutoring (NOT classes with Prof. Safarov).

1  2  3  4  5

Are you satisfied with the level of the class? (1 not at all, 5 very satisfied)
☐ ☐ ☐ ☒ ☐

The speed of the class is: (1 too slow, 5 too fast)
☐ ☐ ☒ ☐ ☐

Do you think that this class is useful? (1 not at all, 5 very useful)
☐ ☐ ☒ ☐ ☐

What about the explanations? (1 not clear at all, 5 very clear)
☐ ☐ ☒ ☐ ☐

What do you like about this class?
You take your time to explain everything clearly and detailed.

What do not you like about this class?
It is not exactly clear how much proof is expected from us in the exercises – pending between "obvious" and "needs more explanation".

Suggestions.
It might be useful to focus more on problem solving strategies and proof techniques than explaining details that could also be worked up from lecture notes easily.

Further comments.
Informal Evaluation Form – Analysis I Tutoring

Please give an answer to the following questions concerning tutoring (NOT classes with Prof. Safarov).

Are you satisfied with the level of the class? (1 not at all, 5 very satisfied)

☐  ☐  ☐  ☐  ☒

The speed of the class is: (1 too slow, 5 too fast)

☐  ☐  ☒  ☐  ☐

Do you think that this class is useful? (1 not at all, 5 very useful)

☐  ☐  ☒  ☐  ☒

What about the explanations? (1 not clear at all, 5 very clear)

☐  ☐  ☒  ☒  ☐

What do you like about this class?

clear on explanation

What do not you like about this class?

time is too short to go through the problems

Suggestions.

NONE

Further comments.
Interim Module Evaluation form

The aim of this form is for lecturers to be able to identify any issues or confusions students have early on so that we can address them as quickly as possible. Next week, your lecturer will summarise your responses and address any issues with the class.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? Please tick the appropriate box.

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<th>Facilities</th>
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<tr>
<td>The classroom and its facilities are satisfactory</td>
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<th>The lecturer</th>
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<td>has made the objectives of the module clear</td>
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<td>is audible</td>
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<tr>
<td>has legible writing/slides/etc.</td>
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<td>is explaining the material clearly</td>
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<td>is available to answer questions outside the class</td>
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<th>The pace of the lectures is (please tick)</th>
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What would you like to see on KEATS?

Feel free to add comments here to explain your answers and / or make suggestions for improvement.
*(use reverse if necessary)*

Thank you for taking a couple of minutes out of your class to fill this in. Your feedback is greatly appreciated.
Interim Module Evaluation form

The aim of this form is for lecturers to be able to identify any issues or confusions students have early on so that we can address them as quickly as possible. Next week, your lecturer will summarise your responses and address any issues with the class.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? Please tick the appropriate box.

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<td>is available to answer questions outside the class</td>
<td>✓</td>
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The pace of the lectures is (please tick)

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<th>About right</th>
<th>A bit slow</th>
<th>Too slow</th>
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What would you like to see on KEATS?

Feel free to add comments here to explain your answers and I or make suggestions for improvement.

(Use reverse if necessary)

Thank you for taking a couple of minutes out of your class to fill this in. Your feedback is greatly appreciated.
Appendix B – Writing style

We propose here two solution of the same exercise. We notice the following features;

- The length of the solution and the amount of details written is a distinctive feature of the approach.
- Tendency to extreme concision or wordiness suggests respectively a ‘Pride approach’ or a ‘Prejudice approach’.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Exercise 6:} & \\
& \text{We know that the area is given by } S_S \text{, so we substitute } x = r \cos \theta, y = r \sin \theta. \\
& S_S = \int_0^{2\pi} \int_0^r \rho^2 \sin \theta \, d\rho \, d\theta \\
& = \int_0^{2\pi} \left[ \frac{1}{2} \rho^2 \right]_0^r \, d\theta \\
& = \int_0^{2\pi} \frac{1}{2} r^2 \, d\theta \\
& = \frac{1}{2} r^2 \theta \bigg|_0^{2\pi} \\
& = \pi r^2.
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
7.5.6 & \\
\text{Area}(r) & = S_S \text{, } d\rho \, dy = \int_0^{2\pi} \int_0^r \rho^2 \sin \theta \, d\rho \, d\theta \\
& = \int_0^{2\pi} \frac{1}{2} \rho^2 \sin \theta \, d\theta \\
& = \frac{1}{2} \rho^2 \sin \theta \bigg|_0^{2\pi} \\
& = \pi r^2.
\end{align*}
\]
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‘Primitive’, ‘unsophisticated’ and ‘irrelevant’: addressing first year students’ assumptions about the Middle Ages

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Abstract
This essay investigates the difficulties of introducing the medieval to first year undergraduate English students. Given their characterisations of people’s mindset in the Middle Ages as ‘irrational’, ‘gullible’ and ‘unsophisticated’, I attempted to challenge these views and put across a nuanced view of the medieval period. This was particularly important as for many students this was their first encounter with medieval texts. In this reflective case study I discuss the problems I faced in the classroom when attempting to teach students medieval texts, and evaluate the teaching strategies that I used to deal with them.

Keywords: medieval, teaching, English, Beowulf, critical thinking

Introduction
My first experience of teaching – on the first year English course ‘Introduction to Medieval Literary Culture’ – coincided with many of my students’ first encounters with the Medieval. I taught two classes of around 18 students, and out of these 36 first year undergraduates, only three had read a medieval literary text before. All three of these students had read Chaucer, either at A-level or at GCSE. This lack of familiarity with medieval literary texts, coupled with a lack of familiarity with the historical period, meant that the students’ assumptions about the Middle Ages had not previously been challenged. They thought of the Middle Ages as ‘primitive’, ‘unsophisticated’ and therefore irrelevant to their lives. This often hampered their engagement with the texts, as they tended to see them as historical documents with evidence of prior beliefs rather than as literary artefacts in their own right. This reflective case study will discuss the problems I faced in the classroom when attempting to teach students medieval texts, and then evaluate the teaching strategies that I used to deal with them.

As early as the 1970s teachers were concerned that students saw the Middle Ages as ‘not “with it”’ (Danker, 1970), and began to agonise over different ways to teach the period to undergraduate students. The problems encountered when teaching the medieval period to undergraduates have since been exacerbated by A level syllabuses that include medieval material only as part of a pre-1900 optional module. As Rayner (2008) explains, ‘[i]t is now possible to arrive at a university in the UK to study English Literature without any knowledge of medieval texts, a fact that may go a long way to explain the struggles that both undergraduates and medievalists encounter in their first year classes.’ I will begin this paper
with a critical description of the learning objectives and teaching method of the ‘Introduction to Medieval Literary Culture’ course, and then proceed to a discussion of difficulties that the students and I faced. These difficulties were two-fold: firstly, the students saw the Middle Ages as a monolithic period, that is, as an unchanging context for the works we studied, and, secondly, the students saw the Middle Ages as unsophisticated, hampering their engagement with the texts as literature. Throughout, I set these challenges in their wider educational context, focussing on subject and discipline-specific learning methods.

**Description of the course and learning objectives**

The main learning objective of the ‘Introduction to Medieval Literary Culture’ course is to provide ‘an introduction to the literary culture of the medieval period, highlighting some of the key cultural issues of this era’ (King’s College London English Department, 2012). The course is taught with a one-hour lecture and a one-hour seminar per week. The lecture provides an overview of the course material for that week, focussing on the broader themes of the module and the context of the specific text that will be studied. This is led by a specialist in the field, which changes from week to week dependent on the specific text that is being studied; there were four different lecturers over the course of the semester. The seminar, which occurs some time after the lecture, then allows the students to engage with the text in more detail and discuss it with a seminar leader. I led two seminar groups a week, on a Thursday and Friday afternoon. This case study discusses issues that were common to both seminar groups, although it will also draw attention to some differences in my teaching, as it often improved in the second seminar group of the week as I refined my teaching plan in light of teaching the first group.

As ‘Introduction to Medieval Literary Culture’ is a first year course, there is an understanding that most students will not have previously studied the Middle Ages. This course is also compulsory for all first year undergraduates studying English at King’s. For both of these reasons the students are potentially unwilling participants, and so the course has a strong focus on the relevance of the Middle Ages to the present day. The module description explains:

> We will consider borders, boundaries and zones between different places and periods. We will address, for example, the relation between modern and the medieval, and we will travel through different conceptions of time, space and bodies.  
> (King’s College London English Department, 2012)

This decision by the module coordinator to call attention to the differences and similarities between the modern and the medieval was proved correct, as my students’ primary concern was: is it possible to identify with these texts, or were the people creating them just too different? Each week the focus was on a different medieval text, with the exception of two weeks spent at the beginning on *Beowulf* and two weeks at the end of the semester on Mandeville’s *Travels*. The course required students to engage with the texts as literary artefacts and also to gain an awareness of their context within English literary history.

One of the main difficulties in teaching the course was that it was a general survey of medieval literary culture. By definition, this meant that it attempted to introduce students to a wide variety of material. The course included only eight individual texts, but these texts spanned
around seven hundred years of history, from c. 700 to c. 1400. This proved a particular challenge, as the course rubric ‘Medieval Literary Culture’ suggested that there was a universal literary culture in the Middle Ages to which all of these texts belonged. Of course, as the texts were written hundreds of years apart, they were in fact very diverse and came from many different contextual backgrounds. The Middle Ages were made up of many literary cultures, interacting differently across time and geographical space. The course attempted to capture this with its focus on translation and boundaries, but my experience of teaching the course suggests that the structure fostered the idea that there was a monolithic Middle Ages, which was unified and unchanging.

However, I do not believe that the structure of the course can be changed to remove this difficulty. As the course is intended to be a survey of the many literatures of the Middle Ages, some of the problems that I encountered with the way that it was structured were unavoidable, as by definition it is supposed to introduce the undergraduates to many different texts. In fact, the course is designed to showcase some of the genres of medieval texts that can be studied more fully in later years. As an example, there is one week on medieval drama during the first year course, and in the second year of the undergraduate English course it is possible to study an entire module based on medieval drama. This ‘taster’ version of the Middle Ages made teaching more difficult as one of the learning objectives I anticipated for the course was for my students to comprehend something of differing medieval contexts, an objective mitigated by the course structure.

**Beginning to teach the Middle Ages**

The students that I taught did not only see the Middle Ages as a single historical context, they also seemed to see it as an unassailably ‘different’ one to which they could not relate. This was clear when analysing texts, as the students tended to attribute motives to authors and characters based on the medieval period’s lack of knowledge. When discussing *Beowulf*, for example, I asked why the monsters were included in the story – what did they symbolise to a medieval audience? This is a literary question based in the structure of the texts; why does the text say what it wants to say by invoking monsters? In both classes, I had a variant of the response ‘because they didn’t know any better’. One student explained that in the Middle Ages ‘they really believed in monsters’. Another agreed saying that they ‘didn’t know what was out there’. This meant that the discussion of a literary idea (‘why does this text invoke monsters?’) changed into a discussion about the differences in how people thought, then and now. This belief in the lack of knowledge of medieval people, often expressed as their ‘lack of rational thought’ and ‘reliance on religion’ continued throughout the course, despite my repeated efforts to challenge it. It also formed a part of many of the 40 randomly selected student essays that I later marked, and so was clearly more widespread than my seminar group. I will now evaluate the teaching strategies that I used to deal with this challenge, basing my observations on the descriptions of lessons in the reflective journal that I kept throughout my teaching, informal student evaluations of my teaching, and the teaching observations of the seminar tutor on my teaching course and a colleague in my department.

I will evaluate the success of teaching strategies in light of my personal theory of teaching. Fox (1983) suggests that teachers’ personal theories of teaching fit into one of four categories:
the transfer theory, the shaping theory, the travelling theory, or the growing theory. In his
description of the growing theory, the student’s mind is like a garden in which there are many
plants, symbolising concept systems. The plants grow on their own, and the teacher’s job
is to encourage the growth of some plants rather than others. This is an appealing model of
teaching to me, as it gives the students responsibility over their own learning with guidance
from the seminar leader; the students are creating concept systems for themselves. This theory
of teaching also involves engaging the students in discussion and debate so that they learn
to think critically about which pieces of information and ways of thinking are more useful or
relevant. I see my role as a teacher, then, to be encouraging my students to think critically and
question received wisdom, using Browne and Freeman’s (2000, p. 302) definition of critical
thinking: ‘a set of skills and attitudes that enable a listener or reader to apply rational criteria
to the reasoning of speakers and writer’. In this case study, when teaching about the Middle
Ages, that means that I wanted my students to develop a set of skills that would enable them
to question their assumptions about and expectations of medieval literature.

I came to the course expecting students to have little knowledge of the medieval, and to find
it difficult to engage with the texts, based on discussions with colleagues who had taught the
module the year before. I attempted to design my first class in such a way as to engage the
students with the material and convey why it was an interesting and important area of study.
In the first class that I taught, I decided to focus on images of artefacts from the Middle Ages,
thinking that this was a good way to discuss different medieval contexts for the literature
we were studying. I was also inspired by Bellitto’s (1995) discussion of encouraging student
engagement with the Middle Ages through focussing on larger concepts, in his case chivalry.
Each image I gave the students was designed to elicit discussion about a different aspect of
the Middle Ages – a monk, a queen, knights from the Bayeux tapestry, a chess piece of a king,
and a helmet from Sutton Hoo. I asked the students to discuss what the images brought to
mind in small groups, and then report back to the class. I stressed to them that there were no
right or wrong answers, and left them for a few minutes to discuss the images. They were very
uncertain about discussing the images, even in small groups, and when I brought them back
to a large group discussion, they were unwilling to make suggestions about what they thought
about the images. They were, in fact, almost silent, and I was forced to ask a lot of questions
to solicit any information from them. My reflective journal completed after this class notes my
disappointment at their lack of response and also the discomfort I experienced with the class
being so silent. This lack of response to my teaching strategy meant that my learning objective
for the first seminar of term – that they should understand why the Middle Ages was an
important period of study – was not met.

In the seminar with my second group the next day, I did not repeat this exercise, as it had
been so unsuccessful the first time. I decided that my own lack of familiarity with image-
based teaching had hindered the lesson, and that I should change the focus. I stood at the
whiteboard and asked students to shout out the first thing that they thought of when I said
‘medieval’, without worrying about being ‘academic’. They proceeded to shout ‘Castles!
Dragons! Knights! Chivalry! Maidens in distress! Dungeons! Feudalism! Serfs! Kings! Queens!’
and so on. This exercise was successful as it broke the ice and got them talking, but also
allowed me to informally assess their knowledge about the medieval period. After this, I asked
them to sit down individually and write down their answer to the question ‘Why should we study medieval literature?’ The discussion following this focussed mostly on the importance of medieval texts as the foundation of English literature; it was important to know about medieval texts, they suggested, as they were the basis for everything that followed that was written in English. So, that class began the term much more successfully than the first: we had managed to establish a reason for studying the Middle Ages, which I had not managed to do with my first group.

The differences between the perceived ‘failure’ of my first class, and the perceived ‘success’ of the second from my point of view meant that I was very unsure about what Burton, Bamberry and Harris-Boundy (2005, p. 161) call ‘personal teaching efficacy’; that is, I was unsure about my own capabilities as a teacher. They argue that ‘if instructors believe they can control their surrounding and have confidence in their ability to succeed at a particular task, then they should feel confident regarding their ability to teach.’ However, the differences in my two classes mean that I was unable to assess my own performance as a teacher in terms of the desired learning outcomes of the sessions. The students did not seem to have grasped what it was that I was trying to get across in the first session – that is, the joy and interest I find in the medieval period. However, having changed the structure of the class, the second seminar group was much more successful.

**Measures to combat student disengagement**

Concerns about how to engage students with the medieval are ongoing within historical and literary pedagogies. Since at least the 1970s teachers have been devising new ways of introducing the medieval to their unengaged students. The assumption of hostility is central to this literature and perhaps prejudiced my teaching, as I assumed students would be dreading the subject that I was teaching. This concern over student non-engagement also means that most responses to the challenges of teaching the Middle Ages to students focus on the interpretive ‘gap’ between the students and the Middle Ages; in other words, that the Middle Ages are too far from the students to be understood without teaching aids. Rayner (2008) calls attention to this specific problem when she muses on whether to teach the Middle Ages through their familiarity or through their unfamiliarity; should she focus on how different things are now, or how much things have stayed the same? Having encountered student non-engagement in my first seminar, I then observed in later classes that students discussed the Middle Ages as an ‘irrational’ and ‘primitive’ age that was more a historical curiosity than the proper subject for literary study. In the wake of these comments I researched a range of teaching strategies that others have used to teach the Middle Ages to students. Below I detail which of these, and to what extent, I decided to incorporate into my own teaching.

Firstly, I considered use of different media in my classroom in order to bridge the interpretive gap between my students and the period we were studying. I have described above how I attempted to use images in my classroom for the same reason, but did not have much success. I then considered using recordings or film in my classroom to stimulate debate. This is not a new idea. Danker (1970) has suggested that the work being done on the oral contexts of medieval literature was a ‘way in’ to their use in the classroom. He states that the research on how medieval English texts were spoken aloud can enlighten these sometimes difficult texts
for an undergraduate audience, suggesting recordings of the texts for classroom use. However, this method has some significant drawbacks, as the research he refers to about the oral contexts of medieval texts is now out of date and he has no evidence in his paper for the success of pedagogical methods based on hearing texts rather than reading them. It was also difficult to incorporate recordings into the classroom in my seminar rooms, as the rooms were not set up with audiovisual capabilities. A more modern approach, but one with similar practical difficulties, is advocated by both Driver (2007) and Rayner (2008), who suggest using films as well as computer and television programmes to bridge the gap between the students and the Middle Ages. I agree with Driver (2007, p. 160) when she argues ‘[a]s a medium for teaching, film is readily accessible to a range of viewers, providing a good starting point for students and their professors.’ However, the practical problems of showing film footage in my classroom remain the same as with audio recordings: the classrooms are not properly equipped. What is more, a lack of time in the seminars meant that it was impracticable to play films or audio clips to my students, as there would have been no time to analyse them in detail. Playing film or audio to a class without the time for proper analysis would lead away from my teaching objectives, as the students would not be engaged by taking part in a discussion and so would not be stretched to think critically about the material. Therefore I decided that teaching with this sort of visual or aural aid was not going to be practicable within my seminars.

I then considered non-traditional teaching methods that incorporated learning through play, such as quizzes or creative engagement with the texts. My hope was that this ‘non-standard’ way of engaging with a medieval text would allow the students to pick up on similar habits of mind rather than categorising the texts as primitive and therefore not worthy of study. One example of this sort of creative pedagogy can be seen in Glendinning’s (2005) suggestion of creating an archaeological dig site for your students to excavate and encouraging them to interpret the results. This encourages close engagement with historical artefacts and context, and has the advantage of being very ‘hands-on’. However, this is clearly impractical on the Strand campus of King’s College London, as well as lacking in the close textual analysis I wished to foster in my students. Haase Menzies (2004) has a more practical suggestion of a reading of *Beowulf* through interpretive play. She argues that class activities such as building a ‘found-object’ sculpture of the monster Grendel from the poem ‘capitalizes on the subconscious aspects of the brain, embeds the learning of information in an emotional, meaningful context.’ This sort of learning, which focuses on developing the student as a thinker, can also be seen in Warren’s (1979) discussion of evil through a comparison between *Beowulf* and Camus’ *The Plague*. He argues that drawing attention to universal themes in the classroom is a way of teaching students about the underlying problems humanity has faced and how it has tried to understand them through literature. However, this form of teaching is fundamentally ahistorical, which means that it does not ask students to engage with the medieval as a historical period, but rather reflect on general notions of evil. The learning objectives for the ‘Introduction to Medieval Literary Culture’ course, which require students to highlight the cultural issues of the medieval period and base their discussion of the texts in a specific time period, are difficult to meet through this sort of activity.

However, I was keen to try out some more informal learning based in play, as I saw it as a possible way to encourage my students to see the literary value of the medieval texts we were
studying. To this end, I set my students an informal quiz on *Beowulf*, asking them to match up the kennings (figures of speech describing a person or object) with the characters that they referenced. I gave them five minutes to complete the activity in pairs, and then asked them to shout out their answers. The aims of this activity were to get students talking at the beginning of the lesson and also to draw their attention towards the language of the original text and its rhetorical power. The students in both classes engaged with this activity fully and responded to the discussion afterwards about the use of poetic kennings in Old English verse with interest. This was a successful way of drawing attention to the literary forms of the Old English text without being too formal. I could have taken this activity further, perhaps asking them to compose their own kennings, or create some sort of artwork based on *Beowulf*. However, although the students did not mind engaging in a short quiz, it may have been difficult to motivate them to engage in a longer play-based activity. I was keen for the students to grow as critical thinkers, but also to engage with the medieval texts in a way that would enable them to meet the module requirements to engage with the texts in their period context.

The students seemed to be almost singularly motivated by preparation for their end of term essay, asking me repeatedly if I would work with them on previous essay questions, whereas I was keen for them to engage with the texts deeply. As Fox (1983, p. 160) notes, sometimes a mismatch between student and teacher perceptions of learning creates problems in the classroom. Students ‘who view the teaching and learning process as a transfer of knowledge ... will expect well-structured lectures which leave them with a set of comprehensive notes which they can learn and later reproduce in an examination. Such students will be impatient with any attempts at introducing experiential learning such as projects, simulations and games.’ This is evident in the mid-term evaluation of my teaching that I asked both groups to complete, based on the Stop, Keep, Add formula. Students from both of my seminar groups asked me to add ‘more essay planning help’, ‘more handouts’, and ‘more sample questions’, showing their worry about evaluation. However, they also asked to continue with large group discussion. It seemed unproductive to attempt more play-based activities such as the quiz when the students wanted to continue with large and small group discussion, so I considered ways of teaching that would introduce ideas about the Middle Ages to the class, but in a format that they enjoyed.

**Close analysis of two seminars**

One way in which I attempted to extend my students’ engagement with the Middle Ages beyond their original discussion of it as ‘primitive’ and ‘unsophisticated’ was through activities that foregrounded the status of the texts we were studying as literature. This was particularly important with *Beowulf*, as at the beginning of the first lesson it was clear some students did not see it as literary. When asked what they thought about it, some students said that they had enjoyed it, while some found it boring. In my reflective journal I have noted that one student responded to my question by saying that it ‘wasn’t really literature’ and instead it should be looked at to ‘think about what was happening at the time’, that is, as historical data rather than as poetry. Other students nodded and seemed to agree with this statement. Therefore, in the next class that I taught on *Beowulf*, I designed an activity that focussed on close reading and the literary qualities of the text. I gave the students four different translations of a short section of *Beowulf*, describing Grendel’s mother. This meant that they had read five versions
of this passage including the Seamus Heaney translation that had been assigned for class. I put them into pairs and asked them to tell me which translation of the passage they liked best, which they liked the least and why. The aim of this task was to stimulate discussion about the fact that we were reading the text in translation, as well as calling attention to the very different ways the same piece of the source text could be translated and, therefore, (hopefully) drawing attention to its status as a literary work. After the class had discussed the translations in pairs, I brought them back to a large group and went through each translation individually, asking which students liked each one best and which students liked each least, pressing them on why they had made their decision. This required them to perform a close reading of the language of the different translations in order to tell me why they were effective. This worked well as a way of calling the students’ attention to the language of the poetry, and also gave them an appreciation of Beowulf as a literary object that can be interpreted in many different ways.

From this point of view, the task was successful in achieving my aims for the class, as the students were able to consider Beowulf as a literary text. However, this activity also had an unexpected outcome. Students from both classes responded angrily to the Seamus Heaney translation of the poem, as it includes pointed references to the English colonization of Ireland and in the introduction, Heaney calls the translation of this Old English poem his ‘birthright’. The students were of the opinion that this was ‘inappropriate’, as Heaney ‘should not have introduced politics’ to the poem. In my first class I asked the speaker to expand on this view but she was unwilling to do so and the rest of the class were not keen to express a view either way. I therefore felt like a ‘teachable moment’ had passed without comment, as I had not challenged my students’ feelings of ownership over Beowulf as a ‘national’ poem, nor had I managed to get them to interrogate their kneejerk feeling of distaste at the political overtones of Heaney’s translation.

In my second class I was more prepared for the students’ responses to the Heaney poem. I deliberately left Heaney’s translation until last in our discussion, so that there would be time to interrogate the students’ responses to the text. This class expressed similar views to the first, stating that Heaney’s appropriation of the poem to talk about English oppression of the Irish was bringing politics into an apolitical poem. One student said angrily ‘It would be like me going to Ireland and taking a Gaelic poem and translating it with references to the IRA! That wouldn’t be OK!’ I responded by asking the students to think about the relative power dynamics inherent in the relationship between Ireland and England, saying that ‘England is the oppressor in this situation’ and asking them to see Heaney’s response from the perspective of the historically oppressed. In retrospect I see that my response to the class’ anger at the translation bears a close resemblance to one of the strategies advocated in Browne and Freeman’s (2000, p. 306) work on the critical thinking classroom. They argue that ‘[b]y stimulating controversy intentionally, a professor can engage in a form of intellectual affirmative action whereby minority positions are conscientiously given fair treatment.’ By asking the students to think about themselves as colonial oppressors, I intentionally stimulated controversy. As Browne and Freeman (2000) point out, controversy can be seen as divisive, and I found the experience of contradicting the students to be very uncomfortable, even though I believed it to be necessary to extend the thinking of my students past their kneejerk
negative response. However, the fact that modern poets could translate Beowulf in such a way that it could move some of my students to anger and discomfort was, I thought, a good demonstration of the power of the original text. This showed me that teaching is often about responding properly to the students’ concerns.

Another moment in which my teaching linked modern concerns with medieval ones was when we were discussing medieval English lyric poetry. I chose one love poem and one more religious poem from the set and asked half of the students to close read one poem and half to close read the other. We then brought it back to a large group discussion. When discussing the love poem, one student said that she thought it was ‘sexist’. I asked her to elaborate on her point and she said ‘it’s all about him! He’s just looking at her and telling us what she looks like, but he doesn’t tell us anything about her at all!’ I asked the other students to point out parts of the poem that agreed with her assessment of it. I then gave a brief summary of the theoretical idea of the ‘male gaze’, the argument deriving from film study where the camera is put into the position of a heterosexual man, for example focusing on the curves of a woman’s body. I then asked the students to discuss some modern music that had similar ethics of view, and we discussed how medieval ideas of love still have an effect on how we experience being in love today, as love songs to individual women rose in prominence in the Middle Ages. This was a moment in which I felt that I had successfully married the students’ modern concerns with the medieval source text, and challenged their view of the Middle Ages as more ‘backward’ than the present day. However, the impetus for this successful discussion of sexism then and now came from one of the students, and not from me, although it was in the framework of the close reading task that I had planned. This hammered home to me that the success of my class in engaging students was based in my responses to what they offered in class, as well as the tasks that I had planned in advance.

**Conclusion and suggestions for the future**

In conclusion, some of my teaching strategies were more successful than others in leading my students towards a nuanced understanding of the medieval period and its relevance to their lives. The use of images in the classroom seemed to make the students uncomfortable, though this may be due to my lack of familiarity with image-based teaching, rather than the relative worth of this teaching strategy. The use of different translations to encourage the students to discuss *Beowulf* as a literary text was successful, especially as it had the unexpected outcome of provoking a discussion of colonial power and control. The discussion of sexism provoked by my students’ responses to the lyric text was also a great ‘teachable moment’, as it allowed us to discuss the concerns raised by medieval texts as they affected our own lives. Were I in the position to design my own course, basing it around controversial subjects such as gender and colonial power this might be a way to encourage students to reflect on medieval texts as no more ‘primitive’ than some problematic texts in our own time, and encourage critical thinking in the classroom.

Another suggestion that I would consider for the future is embedding this sort of critical thinking into essay writing assistance in my seminars. I included one week of essay planning help, but in my teaching observation on this session, my observer commented that ‘it did seem like a lot of information to take in just one session – I would suggest introducing more of
these tips throughout the academic year rather than all at once before essay deadlines’. One way of doing this is suggested by the work of Gunn (2000, p. 313) on non-traditional ways of teaching history. She explains a strategy she adopted as follows:

‘Each group had to discuss an essay topic which they had received in advance ... each member of the group had to take responsibility for writing a paragraph in response to the essay set which had to be linked to the others being produced by the group, so that the group would present a mini essay comprised of individual contributions. The group’s essay, however, had to have an agreed critical stance/hypothesis that each paragraph attempted to prove, which was stated explicitly within an introduction and reinforced within a conclusion.’

She then asked the students to read out their composite essays, and gave verbal feedback. This type of exercise includes both writing skills and focus on producing a coherent argument and backing it up with evidence from the source material. This type of explicit modelling of critical thinking through essay writing is particularly important when seen in the light of Ardizzone’s et al. (2004) work on decoding the humanities. They explain that explicit modelling in the humanities is especially vital because students are not aware that they must learn new ways of thinking in order to succeed at university level. I plan to introduce an exercise based on Gunn’s work into my own teaching, to incorporate the nuanced understanding of the medieval that my students gain in seminars with a practical essay writing task.

Having received the anonymous end of term student evaluations of my teaching, it seems that I was successful in changing some minds about the Middle Ages: ‘Very enthusiastic. Inspired interest in a subject that I would have otherwise got bored with’, ‘Really enjoyed all of the seminars, great teacher. Made the subject more interesting than I was anticipating!’, ‘Really enthusiastic. Got me wanting to contribute despite not being a medieval fan’ and ‘Made me enjoy this module far more than I expected to’. It seems, then, that what the students remember most about my teaching is my enthusiasm for the Middle Ages, and that seems to have been my greatest asset as a teacher.

References


Horizontally linked reading in an English Literature seminar

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Abstract
This essay is an evaluative case study of teaching I conducted on a first year undergraduate module in the Department of English at King’s College London in late 2012. It evaluates the various strategies I employed when attempting to create a learning environment amenable to reading for accumulated meanings between texts. The essay draws on literature relating to concept mapping to illustrate how these accumulated meanings can be best described as a form of horizontally linked reading. I illustrate how this reading approach can promote critical thinking and I consider how students can be encouraged to read in this fashion both within and without the seminar classroom. Through this, the essay also considers the role of questions when teaching and learning in higher education.

Keywords: Reading practices, concept mapping, critical thinking, English literature, questioning

Introduction
This essay is an evaluative case study focused on some of the fundamental issues I encountered while teaching an English Literature seminar. Namely: how to move students away from a hierarchical conception of literature; how to create horizontally linked readings of texts; the role of questions in learning and teaching. Implicit in these aims is a desire to facilitate a constructivist and accumulative learning experience within the classroom. What is meant by these terms will be defined as the essay proceeds. At this point, however, it is worth noting that while this learning experience is valued by lecturers working in the field of English, there has tended to be something of a mystery around how this mode of understanding is actually constructed. As one literature lecturer has stated in relation to their teaching: ‘students are accumulating knowledge of a scene, a cultural scene, over the semester and so that I hope that there is an accumulation of response’ (cited by Weller, 2010, p. 100). Rather than a detailed and concerted strategy for generating an accumulation of knowledge within a literature course, there can be a tendency to rely on more abstract desires of chance and ‘hope’. Consequently this essay aims to illustrate some of the ways in which I sought to create a learning environment explicitly designed to promote such accumulation within the reading practices of my students.

The essay reflects on a set of seminars I led during the winter term of 2012 as part of the Writing London module run by the English department at King’s College London. It discusses the importance of an accumulation of response to English literature and how the design of Writing London is related to what I term horizontally linked reading. This analysis then allows the essay to focus upon the various strategies I deployed to facilitate this teaching aim. The
critical reflection of my teaching is based upon my personal observations, my weekly seminar logbook and my student evaluations. The discursive nature of both the seminar format and the discipline of English literature also encouraged me to experiment with the role of questions in this context. Consequently this essay concludes by reflecting on how I can deploy and construct questions more effectively when developing future learning environments.

**Horizontal links and English Literature**

In the study of English literature, the shift away from New Critical paradigms of analysing a text's *internal* structures refocused attention upon how a broader set of *external* factors could help to elucidate a work’s meaning and significance. This is a movement Bawarshi (2000, p. 346) has described with reference to Northrop Frye: ‘Frye has argued that literary texts do not, as the New Critics claimed, exist as free-standing structures, but instead exist in relation to one another’. For Bawarshi (2000, p. 336), this relational understanding of literature is crucial because it can ‘help us [to] synthesize the multiple and often factionalized strands of English Studies’, a discipline which – building upon Eagleton’s classic definition (2008, p. 7) – can consider almost anything as being literary so long as ‘somebody decides to read it as such’.

The implications this external focus has had upon the teaching and learning of English literature in higher education can be visualised through a concept map (Figure 1). Concept maps are based on a hierarchical structure of knowledge – in this context the texts studied – which are then horizontally linked through propositional comparisons and relationships (Kandiko *et al.*, 2011). This promotes what Novak (1993, p. 183) has described as a constructivist view of learning, whereby knowledge is created through ‘recognition of new relationships (propositions) between concepts’. In terms of English literature, the focus on one text’s relationship with another means that the creation of these ‘new relationships’ becomes just as important as an understanding of the actual text itself. Rather than simply studying a set of texts in isolation, concept mapping demonstrates how emphasis can also be placed on the external factors that can link otherwise disparate texts together. In this model, the ‘conceptual relationships’ or ‘horizontal links’ between texts are given as much (if not more) value than the linear hierarchy created by the texts themselves (Daley, 2002, p. 22).

The possibilities created by this more externally focused reading of literature are noteworthy because, as Daley has observed (2002, p. 22), in terms of concept maps ‘the horizontal links represent the learner’s ability to […] create his/her own unique meaning structures’. In other words, the emphasis on a comparative and horizontal linking of texts can encourage students to think independently, to move away from more pre-decided content and towards what Golding (2011) has described as a more critical mode of thinking. While Hay (2007),

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1 The department of English at King’s College London, for example, lists a diverse range of ‘texts’ as representing its research and teaching strengths: ‘material and visual cultures, American studies, performance studies, postcolonial studies, medical humanities, cultural theory, creative writing, gender and queer theory, media history and the theory and practice of lifewriting.’ (King’s College London, 2012 online).
Kandiko et al. (2011) and Kinchin et al. (2008) have all demonstrated ways in which the development of these horizontal links can be visualised through concept maps, this essay is a reflection on how such horizontal links can be taught and learnt in the first place.

**Figure 1.** Example of a concept map in the discipline of English with attention to horizontal links between texts

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**Horizontally linked reading in the design of Writing London**

The design of many modules within university English departments tends to be orientated towards teaching for such horizontally linked relationships between texts. This is exhibited most lucidly in the creation of thematic modules, such as the *Writing London* course with which this essay is concerned. Taking London as its theme, ‘the module is arranged’, as the course outline puts it, ‘in reverse chronological order, to give a sense of digging down into the strata of London’s accumulated meanings’ (Henderson, 2012, p.3). With that notion of ‘accumulated meanings’, emphasis is placed upon conjoining temporally disparate texts so as to collect and collate a deeper understanding about the city. Horizontally linked reading is, therefore, integral to the course and this is reflected in the module’s end-of-assessment task which requires students to draw comparisons across two primary texts from different periods. Indeed, such an assessment task is integral to many modules in the English department at King’s. As King’s *English Language and Literature Guide to Writing Essays* (King’s College London, 2012, online) states: ‘Often an essay question will ask you to compare two primary texts in your answer’. Similarly, to attain the highest grade when seminar participation is assessed, a student must show the ability to make connections to other materials already studied on the module (King’s College London, 2012). Horizontally linked reading, then, registers high on the department’s learning and teaching expectations and could even be considered something of a threshold concept.
However, while a module like *Writing London* may be designed with an emphasis on horizontally linked reading, it is also structured in a way that undermines such aims. The course is taught through a weekly lecture and one hour seminar. Each week focuses on one specific text, period and theme relating to London (Figure 2). Consequently the course imposes a linear model that runs counter to the horizontally linked reading around which students will be assessed. This point is exacerbated by the course’s use of new lecturers for each week of the course, all of whom remain largely uninvolved in any other aspect of teaching on the module. As a result, a greater sense of overall coherence and consistency must come from the seminars which are taught by the same seminar-leader for the entirety of the course. Understood in this way, the lectures disseminate something close to what Kinchen *et al.* (2008, p. 321) have perceived as expertise – ‘the selection of appropriate chains of practice’

### Figure 2. Weekly lecture guide to the *Writing London* module (Henderson, 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Lecturer</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 October</td>
<td>Self-Discovery</td>
<td>Dr Ruvani Ranasinha</td>
<td>Hanif Kureishi, <em>The Buddha of Suburbia</em> (1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 October</td>
<td>Punks</td>
<td>Professor Mark Turner</td>
<td>punk poetry, music, and film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 October</td>
<td>Modernity</td>
<td>Dr Anna Snaith</td>
<td>Virginia Woolf, ‘The Docks of London’ (1931) and ‘Street Haunting’ (1927) and Ford Madox Ford, <em>The Soul of London</em> (1905)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 October</td>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>Dr Ian Henderson</td>
<td>Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘A Case of Identity’ and ‘The Man with the Twisted Lip’ from <em>The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes</em> (1892)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reading Week**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Lecturer</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 November</td>
<td>Finance and Ruin</td>
<td>Dr Adelene Buckland</td>
<td>Charles Dickens, <em>Little Dorrit</em> (1857)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 November</td>
<td>Pleasure</td>
<td>Dr Rowan Boyson</td>
<td>representations of Vauxhall Gardens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 November</td>
<td>Filth</td>
<td>Professor Clare Brant</td>
<td>John Gay, <em>Trivia, or, The Art of Walking the Streets of London</em> (1716)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 December</td>
<td>Trade and Trickery</td>
<td>Professor Gordon McMullan</td>
<td>Thomas Dekker, <em>The Shoemaker’s Holiday</em> (1599)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 December</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Dr Sarah Salih</td>
<td>‘The Pearl Poet’, <em>Saint Erkenwald</em> (1386)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
– while the seminars provide an opportunity for distribution of what they have concomitantly identified as expert knowledge – ‘an integrated/holistic framework of understanding’.

The significance of this differentiation is that it highlights how the seminar should function with regard to the horizontally linked that reading this module aims to promote. As students emerge from lectures with a more prescribed and circumscribed understanding of each week’s text, the seminar must subsequently seek to situate that knowledge within the broader and holistic framework with which the module is concerned. In other words, the seminar is designed to re-position the linearity of each week’s lecture within the more holistic and horizontal framework the course hopes to furnish. From a learning perspective, then, the seminar serves to facilitate a transition from the lecture’s more scripted and pre-determined mode of learning, to constructing the ‘deeper and more personal understanding’ and individual ‘knowledge bases’ that both Kandiko et al. (2011, p. 78) and Daley (2002, p. 28) have argued the horizontal linking of hierarchical concepts can create.

The problem
The seminar’s focus on promoting horizontally linked reading raises other problems, however. Most immediately, there is a fundamental disconnection between how a seminar-leader and a student make horizontal links when reading texts. This is a situation that has been astutely examined by Weller (2010). Although Weller’s research is focused on how individual texts are read, her findings are still valuable to the argument of this essay. This is because Weller exposes how the major differentiation between lecturer and student approaches to reading revolves around broader textual relationships. While lecturers perceive texts as being in conversation with a ‘multilayered’ set of factors, students are inclined to be ‘one-dimensional’ in their approach, applying a fixed and singular angle with which to conduct their reading (Weller, 2010, p. 93). For students there is, then, something of a preference for linear reading – one text and one theme at a time – and an inexperience with the more constructivist mode of learning and critical thinking that horizontal links can encourage.

This was a problem I encountered in the seminars I led. While my students came to class well prepared to discuss the weekly theme prescribed by the course outline and presented in the lecture (Figure 2), they were far more reticent when it came to moving the discussion beyond these parameters. Similarly, when asked if they could relate a given text or theme to any others discussed on the course, the connections made were often superficial or lacked depth and complexity. Horizontal links that were offered tended to be more descriptive than analytical, outlining obvious similarities that contained little nuance or detail. Part of the problem may be that this was a first term, first year module at King’s and so the students were mostly fresh from an A-level experience of learning. As Smith and Hopkins (2005, p. 313) have noted, ‘A-Level study is very guided, with most of the work being done in class. This is not the case at university’. Recent A-level students are, therefore, unlikely to be familiar with moving beyond a prescribed set of learning structures such as those provided by the module’s linear timetable (Figure 2). What follows, then, is a reflection on the various strategies I employed to encourage horizontally linked reading in seminars and how, moreover, these strategies sought to move students towards a more personal, constructivist and critical mode of thinking about the diverse range of texts offered by the Writing London module.
Reflection on teaching strategies

Thought encouraging questions

As the Writing London seminars are designed for group discussion and as the humanities are orientated towards a discursive articulation and negotiation of knowledge (Kandiko et al. 2011; Weller, 2010), considering the role of questions when trying to teach horizontally linked analysis was an appealing starting point. Broadly speaking, this was a strategy that aligned well with the features of a literature seminar. Initially I had bluntly asked students if they could connect a theme raised by one text to another we had previously discussed. Students were often hesitant in their response and some expressed an uncertainty as to why such questions were being raised. The course outline had suggested that students should read a specific text in terms of a specific theme for each week’s seminar; consequently they were unsure why that text and theme should then be related to alternative topics. The students were, it seems, caught in the ‘one-dimensional’ reading that Weller has described and not attuned to the ‘multilayered’ approach with which lecturers read literature.

Golding’s study (2011, p. 362) of thought-encouraging questions provided a strategy by which I could refine my use of questions so as to address these problems:

‘To identify disciplinary specific thought-encouraging questions, we need to ‘reverse-engineer’ the thinking of an expert. For example, what does a doctor ask her/himself when making a diagnosis? What does a sociologist ask when constructing an interpretation of a social event? What does a physicist ask when evaluating a theory?’

Having read this article, I decided to ask myself as a more expert reader: what do I ask when reading a text? My answer wavered along the lines of: what are the traces a text creates? What are the contexts in which a text is situated? How can the deeper resonances in a text be uncovered through a comparison with other texts? This was clearly a convoluted response and, as Golding (2011, p. 363) notes, ‘these questions will then need to be simplified to their basic form so they can be used by novices to the discipline’. I decided, therefore, to construct just one thought-encouraging question for the Writing London course, namely: what is unclear in this text’s representation of London? My reasoning behind this question centred on the fact that I knew from my own reading practice that textual ambiguities can be clarified through a comparison with other texts. Raising this question could, therefore, encourage students to understand that an individual text is in dialogue with a multitude of others and that a text’s deeper meanings could be distilled through such a comparative analysis. Moreover, as there are no predetermined answers to such a question – texts are ambiguous to different readers in different ways – such a question could also facilitate a more personal and critical response to the literature being studied. This would also ensure that my line of questioning avoided funnelling towards a ‘right’ outcome as can be the case with, say, Paul’s (1995) method of Socratic questioning.

I conducted my fourth seminar with this question in mind. The theme for this week was ‘Modernity’ and the texts under discussion were from two modernist writers: Virginia Woolf and Ford Maddox Ford. The seminar began with an excellent discussion and following this I
asked if there were any elements of the texts’ representations of London which still remained unclear. Some students stated that they were unsure about how Woolf presented her status as a woman walking unescorted on the streets of London. At this point a debate ensued and the class was uncertain whether or not Woolf’s description suggested a sense of empowerment or exclusion. This was an idea we had discussed previously, in a seminar concerned with ‘self-discovery’ in Hanif Kureishi’s novel *The Bhuddha of Suburbia*. Subsequently I asked the class: have we encountered this topic in any other texts on this course? While students were able to see a parallel with Kureishi’s novel, they struggled to make a comparative analysis between the two texts or, indeed, to answer the question which now faced them: how can Kureishi’s representations of self-discovery in London illuminate Woolf’s own depiction of that topic?

Golding’s research (2011, p. 363) stresses that thought encouraging questions should aim ‘to create an educative community of critical thinking’. One of the ways Golding (2011, p.363) suggests that these aims could be met is by aligning these questions with assessment: ‘the questions should also be used as criteria to assess critical thinking.’ This is certainly the case with my approach to *Writing London* – here my thought encouraging questions are intended to align with the questions posed in the course’s final assessment. Consequently, I concluded this class by iterating that such comparative analysis is precisely what the students will be examined on in the module’s summative assessment. Some students evidently began to see the value in asking themselves these questions and highlighted what had been an obstacle to them in performing this task during the seminar. As one student noted, ‘it is often hard to recall what we had discussed in pervious classes’. This point was then expanded by another member of the class who stated that previous seminar discussions were not something they considered when reading the next week’s text. I encouraged them to do this in future and began to look for ways in which I could scaffold students to conduct such horizontally linked reading independently.

**Concluding and beginning seminars**

An important space in which horizontally linked reading can be promoted comes at the intersection between seminars: the blank, ‘non-teaching’ space which comes between the conclusion of one week’s seminar and the beginning of the next. Following a teaching observation by my King’s Learning Institute tutor, it was suggested that I reflect on precisely this aspect of my teaching with the aim of facilitating personal study across this time period. As the observation report (Weller, 2012, pers. comm.) puts it:

‘You could ask students at the end of the session to summarise the discussion and to assess the most important issues and any remaining questions that may need to be explored through independent study and/or the next session.’

In the post-observation discussion we identified how this strategy could also encourage a mode of horizontally linked reading between texts and topics. Specifically, it was suggested that I could conclude by asking students: “based on our discussion today what will we need to talk about next time to explore the questions we have about the themes/issues/topic/text?”’ (Weller, 2012, pers. comm.).
Following this advice I decided to try and scaffold students to conduct horizontally linked reading by employing such concluding questions in my ‘Writing London’ seminars. Having learnt from my construction of thought-encouraging questions that lucidity and simplicity are necessary to avoid confusion, I also turned to Light’s et al. discussion (2009) of classroom assessment techniques or CATs. As they note in reference to the minute paper, an effective way of concluding a class is to ask students ‘to answer just two questions at the end of each session: “what is the most important thing you learnt during the session?” “What is uppermost now in your mind at the end of the session?”’ (Light et al., 2009, p. 254). Adapting this line of questioning to my purposes, I planned to pose the following question to students during the final five minutes of the seminar: ‘based on our discussion today, what facet of London represented in this text would you like to explore further?’ Like the thought-encouraging question on ambiguity, this question aimed to foreground an area that could be clarified via comparative readings. However, by positioning this exploratory question at the end of the seminar it also encouraged students to engage in a form of horizontally linked reading outside the classroom. This would then be reinforced by a follow-up task in which students would be asked to read next week’s set text with the answer to this closing question in mind.

I decided to employ this concluding strategy in my sixth seminar. The discussion for this seminar proceeded well. Students engaged in close reading exercises and critical discussion with confidence and towards the end of the seminar the discussion slid towards a debate about the role of disguise in London. By this point the class was coming to a close, so I asked my concluding question. One student responded that they were still uncertain as to how ideas of disguise and secrecy could be related to the financial ruin depicted in the passages that we had examined. They also indicated that they were particularly interested in this theme because it was one that they remembered from the Sherlock Holmes stories we had studied earlier in the term. This was encouraging because it suggested that this student was beginning to perceive the texts they read as being in dialogue with other literature on the course. I asked the class to consider this topic of ‘ruin and disguise’ as they did their reading for next week’s seminar, which was otherwise concerned with ideas of ‘pleasure’ as depicted in representations of Vauxhall Gardens. I also stressed that I would be beginning next week’s seminar by discussing how the ideas of ‘ruin and disguise’ that had emerged from this seminar could relate to the new text we were to discuss. Students were therefore told to come to class prepared to expand on this theme as well as the topic that was already set by the course outline.

I opened the next seminar by asking students how they felt last week’s discussion of ‘ruin and disguise’ affected their reading of the new texts on Vauxhall Gardens. The student who had raised this as a possible theme to consider between seminars provided some interesting points of comparison; however the other students in the class were reluctant to respond to these observations. I was disappointed that the students had not fully engaged with the task which I had set them and re-examining the students’ mid-term seminar evaluations I began to understand why. In this questionnaire some students had indicated that they preferred not to be set tasks between seminars. As one student wrote, ‘I don’t like being set tasks for next week’s seminar, I find it more useful to read the texts in light of what has been said in the lectures’. Again there is seemingly a preference for reading texts one-dimensionally, in light of
the set theme covered in the lecture. The final strategy I reflect upon outlines one of the ways in which I attempted to overcome this reading practice within the realm of the seminar itself.

**Modelling expert reading through handouts**

Golding’s examination (2011, p. 361) of how to create a learning environment focuses on critical thinking, and stresses the need to make critical thinking ‘visible and concrete’. By explicitly modelling how an expert reads a literary text in a multi-layered fashion, I realised that I might be able to demonstrate the valuable insights this style of reading can unlock. Golding (2011, p. 360) argues that his theorisation provides a general model which can then be refined according to the particularities of a specific discipline: ‘for example, being able to give a reason can be developed into a close textual reading for English’. However, my re-examination of the student evaluation forms problematized this developmental narrative. The feedback forms had suggested students found the use of handouts particularly effective: ‘Yes, handouts are very helpful. Helps focus [sic] on a smaller section of text for closer, more specific reading’. Yet this was from a perspective that was always already critical in its thinking. I had selected the passages and thus had already made an implicit judgement about what should be examined. Rather than a judgement or reason being refined into a close reading, the feedback forms indicated that students found their critical thinking was most effectively facilitated through a reverse of this process: starting with a close reading from which my wider critical reasoning could then be extracted. In this, the evaluation forms provided a valuable insight into how I could adapt Golding’s theorisation to my purposes. I had been using handouts to facilitate close reading exercises, but in the few remaining seminars I decided to re-orientate these exercises so that they also demonstrated the value of horizontally linked reading – making this mode of critical thinking a ‘visible and concrete’ judgement for the students to extract.

The rationale behind my design of these handouts can be distilled with reference to Graff and Hoberek’s experiences (1999) of teaching English literature in higher education. Recalling one class they had recently taught, Graff and Hoberek (1999, p. 250) note how:

> ‘Students who had floundered trying on their own to produce an interesting explication of an O’Connor story did discernibly better when asked to go out and find an article or a book chapter on a story (it doesn’t really matter at this level how good or recent the article is) and disagree with it.’

Just as Graff and Hoberek had found success in asking students to find their own critical voice by examining the arguments of others, so I also created handouts which required students to evaluate the various ways in which critics construct comparative readings of texts studied on the course.

I deployed these handouts during the eighth seminar I led, where we discussed John Gay’s poem *Trivia, or, The Art of Walking the Streets of London*. I produced a handout which featured an extract from Susanna Morton Braund’s essay on this text. The extract contained a passage in which Braund draws a comparison between Gay’s poem and the works of Virgil and Lucretius. I asked students to read this secondary material as they would a primary text,
paying attention to word choice, sentence construction and meaning. This was an exercise they were accustomed to from previous seminars and so they were responsive to the activity. Working in small groups the students dissected the extract and its arguments. The students were alive to the fact that Braund was deftly weaving Trivia’s poem into a larger textual discourse and that through the horizontal links Braund established, she also uncovered deeper meanings within Gay’s poem. Some students also extended Braund’s analysis by making their own horizontal links between Gay’s Trivia and the examples Braund gave from Virgil and Lucretius. In this sense, those students were beginning to think critically – throwing off simplistic epistemic understandings and developing sophisticated understandings – while also experiencing a constructivist sense of learning.

Following this exercise I iterated to the seminar group how they had just examined and described a multi-layered critical reading which consciously sought to establish horizontal links between texts. Again, I stressed the value of adopting this approach by reasserting how the module’s summative assessment was designed to examine this mode of critical analysis. I then gave the group another handout with two passages, one from that week’s text, Trivia, and another from an earlier text on the course, Virginia Woolf’s essay ‘Street Haunting’. Unlike my more usual teaching strategy, I asked the class to undertake a close reading of these passages while replicating the reading style Braund had demonstrated. Could they draw some of their own points of comparison between these two passages, so as to uncover deeper meanings within the texts’ representation of London? The results were mixed. Some students provided very intricate assessments of the two passages and unlocked fruitful and complex points of comparison. Others, however, tended to produce a coherent close reading of the extracts but failed to integrate the two or to read these texts against one another. Interestingly, those who struggled with the exercise tended to frame their analysis with qualifying statements such as: ‘I haven’t managed to tie the texts together’ or ‘I would need more time to think about how these texts can be connected’. These students were, in other words, aware of what a horizontally linked reading might look like even though they were yet to produce their own versions of this mode of learning.

Implications for my future pedagogy
The various strategies I deployed in an attempt to foster horizontally linked reading practices have implications for my future pedagogy. These focus around ways in which I can improve less successful elements and harness those strategies which demonstrated more promise. Firstly, I could ensure a more sustained engagement with the independent reading tasks I set when concluding and beginning seminars by drawing upon what Brookfield and Preskill (2005, p. 52) term the ‘ground rules for conducting discussions’. By establishing ground rules in the first seminar of a course, I could inform the class that I will be setting these reading tasks between seminars while also stressing that these tasks are to be taken seriously. I could also use this as an opportunity to emphasise how these tasks align with the module’s summative assessment, thereby reinforcing the value in conducting this horizontally linked reading strategy while also helping to establish the ‘educative community for critical thinking’ that Golding (2011, p. 363) has described. Were the students to disengage from these tasks later in the term, I could then revisit these ground rules and reiterate their importance and value.
Secondly, although my use of handouts was relatively successful, there is still substantial scope for improving this teaching strategy. Not all students managed to produce their own horizontally linked interpretations of the texts following this exercise. Furthermore, the task could become somewhat repetitive if used in every seminar. One way I could make the exercise more dynamic and effective would be to engage more directly with the process Graff and Hoberek (1999) outline. Rather than creating the handouts and choosing the extracts myself, I could transfer that responsibility to the students during the course of the term. As Graff and Hoberek suggest (1999, p. 250), students performed ‘better when asked to go out and find an article or a book chapter’ independently. One way in which this exercise might be improved, therefore, would be to ask students to find their own examples of how critics have demonstrated a horizontally linked reading practice and for them then to think critically about the values and limitations of that critic’s approach. Again, as this task would require work outside the classroom, it might be an exercise that would also benefit from being established as a ground rule from the outset. In this respect, these potential areas for improvement could both complement each other and also combine to enhance my future pedagogic practice.

**Conclusion**

While a seminar leader on the *Writing London* module, I sought to create an effective learning environment that was amenable to horizontally linked reading. This mode of reading is perceived as a valuable critical resource in the development of English literature undergraduates. Yet despite the importance with which horizontally linked reading is held by university English Literature departments, there is still a degree of mystery surrounding the ways in which this reading practice can be encouraged. My own understanding of how it can be fostered arose from an analysis of how concept maps might operate in the field of English studies. This, in turn, directed me towards a series of teaching strategies which built upon Golding’s study (2011) of thought encouraging questions. As well as constructing my own thought encouraging questions, I also sought to scaffold students to learn horizontally linked reading via the use of handouts that modelled expert practices and by setting reading tasks in-between seminars. These teaching aids worked with varying degrees of success. Nevertheless, I do feel that by establishing the value of horizontally linked reading through the ground rules of any future seminars I lead, I will be better placed to ensure a more effective deployment of these pedagogic techniques.

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Talking things through: facilitating academic discussion in the undergraduate classroom

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Abstract
In this reflective case study, I tease out the specific interactional characteristics and internal hierarchies of a particular second-year seminar group in the English Department at King’s College London in order to examine how I might best use discussion as a means of facilitating student engagement with set texts and improving my students’ skills of critical thinking, analysis, and argument construction. First, I discuss the learning objectives of my particular literature module, entitled Victorians and Social Change, 1830–1870, and the importance of discussion to achieving these objectives before addressing some of difficulties I encountered and some of the specific methods I adopted in order to assist not only student participation in my seminars but also a deeper engagement with the texts and issues being raised.

Introduction
The widely held view that university seminars are an intrinsically important aspect of the teaching and learning process, particularly within disciplines in the humanities, seems to be largely predicated on the belief that academic discussion is a critical learning tool. The validity of discussion – by which I mean, the serious efforts of a group of two or more individuals to share their views and to engage in mutual critiques of those views – as a method of learning is often assumed by educational theorists and critics (see Benwell and Stokoe, 1999; DeKlerk, 1995; Quantz, 2001). In their book-length study, Discussion as a Way of Teaching (2005), Brookfield and Preskill outline what they consider to be the four principal objectives of discussion, which they see as an interactive mode fundamental to wider democratic processes:

“(1) to help participants reach a more critically informed understanding about the topic or topics under consideration, 2) to enhance participants’ self-awareness and their capacity for self-critique, (3), to foster an appreciation among participants for the diversity of opinion that invariably emerges when viewpoints are exchanged openly and honestly, and (4) to act as a catalyst for helping people take informed action in the world.”
(Brookfield and Preskill, 2005: 6)

There is, these critics suggest, a kind of energy, or friction, produced by the examination of divergent opinions in academic discussion that is both productive and self-improving. Thus, the participants in an ideal, dynamic discussion learn to exchange, explore, and interrogate ideas, to construct arguments and to draw upon evidence in support of those arguments and in rebuttal of any counter claims. While such goals are in perfect alignment with the general philosophies of an English department, facilitating this rather utopian vision of exciting,
sustained dialogue amongst inexperienced and often somewhat reticent undergraduate students is, in practice, extremely difficult. There is an underlying assumption being made by departments and critics alike that students not only possess a certain level of self-confidence and a certain level of analytical skills on entering university, but that they will easily enter into discussions with their fellow students, many of whom are in fact complete strangers to them. The acute disparity between ideal and actual seminar discussions raises important questions, I think, about the ways in which teachers might create an environment in which all participants feel that they are supported in articulating clear and convincing arguments while remaining open to conflicting or differently nuanced opinions. As a Graduate Teaching Assistant, what sort of questions should I ask to facilitate, initiate, and advance such classroom discussions? How do I model the kinds of interaction that I wish to promote without dominating or overly directing group discussions, and how do I ensure that my students not only participate in but also actively gain from their seminar discussions?

The student fear of speaking in class
During the spring of 2013, I taught one seminar group on the second-year module, *Victorians and Social Change, 1830–1870*, convened by Doctor Adelene Buckland. This module aims to introduce students to literature in a range of styles and genres from the first half of the Victorian period and is grounded in the assumption that all literature is, at least in part, a vehicle to express and to explore the social, cultural, religious, and political preoccupations of its age. As in the majority of modules in the King’s English Department, students were required to read a new literary work each week alongside some accompanying criticism, to attend a one hour lecture, and then to meet for a one hour seminar group to discuss the week’s text. In this particular module, I found that the lectures were quite ‘information heavy’ in providing the social and historical context of the texts studied, emphasising the authors’ biographies and literary engagement with concerns of the age, and offering a particular reading of the texts in this context. Seminars were then dedicated to analysing and discussing more closely the construction of the texts themselves and developing a level of critical and creative thought around them. Ideally, by the end of the module, it was hoped that students would be able to derive a more informed reading of Victorian literature and culture while gaining a deeper understanding of the construction and craft of the Victorian novel, essay, and poem. This was assessed by a mid-term essay on one text and a final exam, which included a close reading exercise and an essay that compared and contrasted two texts in response to a set question.

Although my seminar was scheduled at 9am on a Friday morning and was, therefore, usually quite a small group of participants, my students were for the most part punctual and well prepared. They had generally finished the required reading – and were comfortable to openly inform me to the contrary on the few occasions that they had not – had reviewed their notes from the previous lecture, and came to class having identified moments of textual allusion to wider cultural issues and to the themes that had been identified in lectures and dealt with in earlier texts. Clearly, at the very minimum, surface-level learning was taking place. However, I quickly noticed that, while my students were quite keen to discuss the text on a basic plot level (for example, who should have married whom, or which characters they liked and disliked) and to provide relevant historical facts, they were noticeably more hesitant to explain the meaning of a given passage or to offer any kind of creative interpretation of the text in
question in the context of those facts. When pressed to consider the potential meanings of a text, students generally fell silent and then, as I endeavoured to ‘wait out’ the silence, they repeated any relevant material that they had gleaned from the lecture or that I had flagged up to them the previous week. This was often prefaced by the remark, ‘as [the lecturer] said...’ in order, I presumed, to actively disassociate themselves from the interpretation. Furthermore, at such times, the burden of these responses fell to the two or three students in the class comfortable enough to speak while a number of their peers sat in a rather awkward silence. I believe that this silence was in part due to a lack of self-confidence and the associated fear of appearing foolish before their peers and in part due to the students’ deeply ingrained prior training for the A-level exams, which teach students simply to identify various tropes, themes, literary allusions, and poetic devices without developing their own critical thought about what these things might mean and what their effect is in and on the text. The kind of collaborative learning taken for granted in literary studies in academic institutions was, in fact, still something of a novelty to these students and, further, it was a clear cause of anxiety and confusion. Confronted with their reticence, I found myself constantly fluctuating between the role of ‘facilitator’ and the far more over-bearing role of ‘instructor’. It became clear that I needed to adjust my teaching practice in order to create a safer space where my students felt more at ease in developing and bringing their own thoughts and impressions to the table. They were, at least for the most part, speaking during seminars, but they were not speaking their own thoughts. I hoped to help my students to present their ideas more confidently and succinctly, and, through discussion with their peers, to learn to nuance and develop these ideas in relation to alternative critical approaches.

**Dismantling the teacher-pupil hierarchy**

My goal in this module quickly became that of allowing each student to discover his or her unique and powerful ‘voice’ in the classroom, in the sense that Elbaz (1988) describes the student voice as signifying;

‘first that one has a language in which to give expression to one’s authentic concerns, second that one is able to recognise those concerns, and further that there is an audience of significant others who will listen.’


Turning to Harwood’s (1989) study of teacher-pupil interactions, I considered his arguments about the implicit hierarchy of classroom discussions and the implications of an academic agenda that was ‘always carefully structured and organised by the teacher’, and thereby offered students little choice about the topics or questions to be discussed or about their preferred methods of discussing them. Harwood’s general conclusion was:

‘When teachers are present either with the whole class or a sub-group, they still operate mainly from within the framework of traditional pedagogy. They always take responsibility for identifying questions, issues, tasks and methods of working. They also tend to place themselves at the centre of the interaction, in ways which may too strongly control the process of discussion and understanding.’

(Harwood, 1989: 191)
The problem of teacher-directed learning highlighted by Harwood as an impediment to student-centred learning brought the potential tension between the exciting interactive environment described above by Brookfield and Preskill that I was striving to create and my own assumption of complete responsibility for the questions and tasks directed towards this goal into sharp relief. As a relatively inexperienced teacher, was I overly concerned with controlling the seminar discussion and associated exercises? Was there a way in which I might place my students more directly at the centre of that interaction and encourage them to take a greater responsibility for their own learning?

In their excellent study of *Small Group Teaching: Tutorials, Seminars, and Beyond* (2004), Exley and Dennick explore in considerable detail the possibilities and limitations posed by ‘student-led seminars’ and even ‘tutor-less tutorials’ in their quest for a democratic classroom, akin to that utopian democracy of Brookfield and Preskill, in which students are actively involved and implicated in a process of mutual learning (Exley and Dennick, 2004: 94–108). One means of achieving this, Exley and Dennick suggest, is the use of student presentations within the seminar format. In this common approach to student-led learning, students are asked to prepare a short presentation on assigned readings or a particular topic for discussion, the content of which is then used by the group as a whole to extend, extrapolate and deepen thinking on the topic. This might be a method of relinquishing much of my perceived authority over both the materials at hand and the questions they raised to my students while allowing them the space to set the agenda each week, to identify areas that they felt warranted more attention, and to ensure that their own questions about the texts were being raised and adequately discussed. I thus determined to assign each student a set text and task them with delivering a short (approximately five minute) presentation on two or three main issues that they had encountered while reading it and what they might mean. Heeding Exley’s and Dennick’s warning that one of the noted difficulties with this student-led approach is that, while the student whose turn it is to lead the discussion is usually very well-prepared and involved in discussion, the non-presenting students may ‘abdicate their responsibilities, attend passively and behave like an audience rather than like participants’ (Exley and Dennick, 2004: 97), I determined that each presentation should conclude with two or three questions directed towards the class in order to open the discussion to the group and to ensure that the remaining students actively listened to the presented material, knowing that they would be called upon to respond to it. This would, I hoped, enhance the students’ learning opportunities by giving them the opportunity to raise any specific difficulties that they had encountered with the reading materials or the lecture and to boost their confidence by giving them each the opportunity to speak in class as a designated ‘expert’ on the week’s text.

Endeavouring to promote a more democratic approach to their learning, I collaborated with my students regarding the incorporation of presentations into the seminar time, explaining my reasons for doing so, and they voted to implement them. As much as possible, I allowed students to elect which text they wished to speak on in order to ease nerves and to foster an already apparent interest in certain areas. The instructions they were given for these presentations were as follows:
1. Identify two major themes or issues raised by the novel that you think warrant deeper scrutiny.
2. Briefly (in approximately five minutes), present your interpretation of these themes in the context of the text and/or other texts on the module.
3. Include specific passages from the text to support your ideas and to raise questions.
4. End with two or three questions that have emerged from your interpretation that we will then discuss in the remaining seminar time.

I had essentially given my students a fairly loose structure for a close reading exercise – one of the tasks required for the final exam – and I noted this for them at the top of the outline, observing that they might use this opportunity to practice the kinds of critical and creative interpretations they would need to conduct for the exam and then strengthen and deepen them through group collaborations. This attempt to demonstrate the productive relationship between curriculum objectives, teaching, learning, and assessment processes to my students was inspired not only by an attempt to promote openness in the classroom but also by my reading on the concept of ‘Constructive Alignment’ (see Biggs, 1996; Biggs and Tang, 2011; Hussey and Smith, 2008). I sensed that they appreciated my openness about the importance of these skills in terms of the assessment and I was encouraged by this and by my more thoughtful alignment of the learning and assessment processes, which appeared to further motivate my students to participate in the discussions ahead, if only for the sake of their grades. Though concerned that this more careful alignment might prompt any surface learners simply to become more strategic in their approach, I nevertheless reflected that the skills modelled in class and required in assessment tasks were highly analytical and would inculcate independent thinkers and strong critics.

As the term progressed, I was pleased to find that each student assigned to a text was always in attendance on the day their presentation was scheduled. The presentations were generally very considered and I found them immensely useful in identifying areas of concern and anxiety for my students as their final questions usually related to concepts or issues that they were sincerely struggling to grasp. However, while the questions worked well, I noted that during their presentations, students were extremely reliant upon their accompanying notes and that the issues they raised were either very heavily researched and often explicitly credited to other critics – methods of research that would be unavailable to the students in exam conditions – or they were drawn more directly from the lecture material with very little or no expansion or individual extrapolation. The hesitancy to offer personal interpretations and immediate impressions beyond the level of the plot remained a problem even when students were given time to prepare. Similarly, the presenters’ peers were evidently engaged in the material raised, furiously making notes during their talk as they always did during lectures, but afterwards, their overwhelming tendency was to unequivocally support the ideas they had heard. Encouragement to disagree or to offer alternative readings of the passages chosen only resulted in a heightened level of discomfort and led them to resort to re-iterations of the presenter’s statement and the much safer territory of exclusively contextual observations. I was disappointed. Had I merely enacted a transference of perceived authority from myself to a chosen student each week?
Formulating responses to other voices

After the second week of presentations, three students attended my office hour together to discuss some ideas that had been sparked by but substantially diverged from another student’s presentation. Their observations indicated to me that the presentations had in fact been effective in sparking debate and discussion amongst themselves, but that this had taken place outside what I had considered to be the safe space of the seminar. Somewhat cheered by this discovery, I nevertheless wondered why they therefore felt the need to bring the discussion back to a smaller version of the academic classroom in my office hour. Were they hoping for some kind of authoritative, ‘final verdict’ from me as instructor, thus re-instituting the teacher-pupil hierarchy I had been endeavouring to dismantle, or did they merely require the assistance of a facilitator to further and deepen their arguments? As the discussion progressed, I discovered that it was the latter and, at the end of the session I asked the students why they had not felt comfortable raising these very sound points during the seminar. They confided that it was fear of offending the presenter that had lead to their reticence in class. This left me with a new set of questions with which to grapple. What might be done to ease student anxiety surrounding the practice of intellectual disagreement, which is, after all, such a critical factor in academic discussions? How might I remove these psychological obstacles to my students’ ability to give expression to their own authentic ideas and concerns and respond effectively and confidently to the feedback and thoughts of fellow students?

Graff and Hoberek had outlined a similar struggle in encouraging their students to define their own ideas in response to and against others in a 1999 article entitled ‘Hiding it from the Kids (With Apologies to Simon and Garfunkel)’. Their case study proffered an alternative to the more formal and structured student seminar presentations I had chosen to implement:

‘In a class Andrew recently taught at the University of Puget Sound on Flannery O’Connor, for example, students who had floundered on their own trying to produce an interesting explication of an O’Connor story did discernibly better when asked to go out and find an article or a book chapter on a story (it doesn’t really matter at this level how good or recent the article is) and disagree with it. Students find it easier to develop their own arguments about the novel’s treatment of race, for example, when they can enter into dialogue with critics who take positions on the question.’

(Graff and Hoberek, 1999: 250)

I knew from my own research practice that I often refined and was better able to elucidate my ideas and arguing in the face of contradictory arguments. Refuting a claim was, in a way, somehow easier and more tangible than simply making one. Encouraged by the success of Graff’s and Hoberek’s approach, I reflected that this might offer me a way to promote debate and genuine discussion in the classroom while maintaining a new level of impersonal distance from the subject being contradicted and thereby reduce the students’ fear of embarrassment or offence. As such, I instructed my students to bring an article or any piece of criticism on the set text to the next class and be prepared to summarise the given argument and, drawing on the text, state why they disagreed with all or part of it.
The following week, after the student presentation and subsequent discussion, in order to ensure that there was time to consider each of the arguments on the text thoroughly, I had each student (there were nine present) briefly summarise the argument that they had brought to class. As there were only four main arguments raised, I put the students into four groups (three were pairs and one was a group of three), each with a very similar argument and asked them to work together to compile a line of argument against the ones they had brought. I told them that at the end of approximately twenty minutes, I would ask them to provide three main reasons why they had disagreed with their critics, drawing on evidence from the set text in order to do so. Mindful of the fact that those students who had visited me in my office hour had seemed more comfortable conducting an initial discussion without my presence, I did not ‘visit’ any of the groups while they worked and deliberately sat in a corner making my own notes, thus allowing them to raise and test ideas amongst themselves without any kind of institutional hierarchy. After forming their groups and arranging the furniture appropriately, there was a period of initial silence while the students stared uncomfortably at their notes and did not make eye contact with each other. Eventually, someone in each group felt compelled to break the ice and as time went on, I observed with pleasure that every student had spoken – a feat I had not yet achieved in classroom discussion – and, at times I even heard the students becoming quite animated in support of various ideas. Part of what they said was pre-prepared, but part of their discussion involved spontaneous reactions to their peers and comparisons of ideas.

During the all too brief time dedicated to ‘reporting back’ to the group as a whole, the students successfully presented strong arguments against the critical texts that they had worked on, using thoughtful evidence to do so. I deemed the exercise a success in creating dialogue between students; however, on reflection, two things about the nature of this dialogue struck me as in need of deeper interrogation. First, the language that my students had used intrigued me. Personal pronouns were entirely disregarded as each of the four groups consistently shared responsibility for the ideas put forward across its members, the speaker always stating that ‘we were thinking... or ‘we decided that...’, so that none of the ideas raised was specifically attributed to any of the students present. My goal had been to encourage students to find their own ‘voice’ by engaging in critical and creative acts of self-expression. Instead, they had shielded themselves from potential criticism by using a collective voice in the larger group situation. Clearly, though they had become critically engaged with the materials, they felt more comfortable speaking with at least some perceived authority behind them. Secondly, I had noticed that during each group’s presentation, their peers did not engage with their ideas and seemed far more consumed by the anxiety of waiting for their turn to speak. Both these observations led me to conclude that, although the case study of Graff and Hoberek had indeed compelled students to enter into a stimulating dialogue with an absent critical voice, there was perhaps more to be done in integrating that dialogue into a more open and inclusive academic discussion.

Facilitating debate and discussion
In the fifth week of Victorians and Social Change, the students were scheduled to discuss Elizabeth Gaskell’s Mary Barton, a ‘condition of England’ novel that has famously divided
critics since its publication. I was, therefore, ideally situated to experiment with incorporating critical voices into the classroom discussion, and decided to push my students’ dialogue with critical works and, through this, with each other one step further. With this in mind, I prepared and brought to class two conflicting academic essays on *Mary Barton*, both of which were by eminent Victorian scholars, confident that the argument between these critics could, if managed properly, spark a similar argument in the classroom. After the student presentation and initial discussion for the week, I presented my students with each critic’s case. The first was a celebration of Elizabeth Gaskell’s ability to capture the voice and political ideologies of the working class through *Mary Barton* and the second was a condemnation of the novel’s overly romantic, melodramatic, and ultimately failed attempt to capture the spirit of the working class adequately. I then divided the class into two groups of four and assigned each group one thesis statement, tasking them with constructing an argument in support of their statement that drew upon the novel for evidence. They were quite confident in doing this after the previous week’s exercise. I then warned them that each group would not only have to present their case but would then have to refute the other group’s claims. Although the discussion would be somewhat artificial given that students were not allowed to choose a side, I believed that this structure would at least ensure that each group had an attentive audience and that their ideas were more thoroughly critiqued and refined through the process of their being challenged while still protecting them by way of the collective voice.

Having had at least twenty minutes to prepare, the students presented strong arguments as they had done the week before. However, this week, with a more attentive audience preparing to challenge them, they substantiated their claims much more carefully with textual evidence. After each side presented their case, I invited them, side by side, to refute each other’s claims. It seemed that the artificiality of being presented with a case to argue and one to refute successfully removed the students’ embarrassment at critiquing one another and the vague spirit of competition I had instilled by designating the groups ‘teams’ had clearly invigorated them. I had very little need to speak for the remainder of the class as the students held onto various points and presented them from different angles, desperately leafing through their notes and the novel to support their cases and finally producing the kind of academic discussion I had naively expected would simply occur in a seminar environment. It was not ideal: there was still an over-reliance upon other critics and upon the lecture materials, but this was significantly reduced by the need to think quickly and to respond to their opponents’ objections. As the session drew to a close, I asked my students to take a moment to reflect upon what they had just achieved, explicitly pointing out to them that in this discussion, they had incorporated all the essential elements of writing an academic essay: determining a line of argument, presenting a series of points to support that argument which were based upon clear textual evidence and then refuting the opposing claims of other scholars. Ever anxious about the assessment, they were both relieved and enthused when I showed them a clear correlation between the day’s activity and the final assessment piece. I asked if they could see the difference between today’s discussion and those we had had previously and the response was a resounding positive. Despite their lapses in confidence and a continued though no longer constant use of the collective voice, I was sure that they now had a better idea of what ‘academic discussion’ actually meant in a practical context, and the ways in which they needed to construct an argument in such kinds of academic discussions. My attempt to
encourage my students to engage in critical debate by ‘piggy-backing’ off established scholars had, I concluded, been a success.

**Conclusions and future practice**

After my seminar on *Mary Barton*, I continued to bring relevant divergent critical voices to class as the main framework for my seminars and a means of encouraging divergent opinions in the classroom. My students grew noticeably more comfortable in voicing disagreement and I experimented with various ways to foster this. One week, for instance, I asked them to grade two essays (one excellent and one quite poor) on the set text and to consider what made the strong argument so strong and so superior to the other. On another occasion, as they still generally maintained the collective voice, I put them in pairs to debate a case one to one and found that they were more confident in owning their arguments than they had been previously.

Having received positive verbal and written feedback from the students on this module, I have determined to continue to integrate differing critical voices and theoretical approaches into seminar discussion and to include two seminars devoted to a class debate, one at the mid-semester mark and one at the end of the semester in order to explicitly model and analyse the elements of producing an academic argument. My discussion with the students who came to see me during my office hour has also taught me to give all students every opportunity to provide feedback on their learning. With this in mind, I will verbally request feedback at the end of each seminar to ensure that the teaching and learning process is as transparent as possible, as well as implementing the department’s procedures for written feedback on the module and seminars.

Inspired by Brookfield’s and Preskill’s argument about the democratic and self-improving powers of discussion in the classroom, and by Elbaz’s concept of the personal voice, my goal as a teacher on the *Victorians and Social Change* module had been to encourage my students to find their own voice and to avoid over-reliance upon the established academic authorities. Ironically, after grappling with their reserve and their fear of self-expression in the learning environment, I was ultimately able to use the very critics my students had overly depended upon to provide them with some clarity and guidance, to model the act of critical disagreement, and to foster an atmosphere of dynamic academic debate.

**References**


Enhancing students’ engagement in Greek art and archaeology (case study)

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Abstract
Research on the topic of ‘engagement in higher education’ has indicated that the most popular three words used to define undergraduate students’ engagement are: interest, enjoyment and interaction. The most commonly cited constraints to effective engagement are either the method of teaching or a lack of student confidence (Charlton et al. 2004).

This evaluative case study stresses the importance of the development and implementation of the results gained from specific initiatives (eg group discussion) and strategies (eg feedback received from mid-semester questionnaire) adopted in the previous academic term. These results have been very beneficial for evaluating my teaching practice and for considering what needs to be retained or altered in the near future.

The aim of this case study is to motivate students from disciplines other than Classics or Greek archaeology to participate in class-discussions in the future academic years.

Keywords: Undergraduates, student engagement, teaching strategies, critical reflection

Introduction
This evaluation case study arises from my recent teaching experience as a graduate teaching assistant of a first-year undergraduate module in Greek art and archaeology in the Classics Department at King’s College London. During the first term of the current academic year (2012–2013), I was involved in teaching weekly seminars to students choosing the discipline of Classics, as well as, other diversified discipline areas, like English, Liberal Arts and French.

In the following sections, which are the outcome of my recent teaching experience, the method and the employment of teaching strategies in seminars of Greek art and archaeology are thoroughly investigated. After being concerned with the various degrees of student-engagement related to my seminars, the structure of the present evaluative case study will be centred on the following three issues. The first section will offer an overview of the academic context of my teaching. Afterwards, the following section will be focused on a number of issues arising from evaluative data (eg teaching observations) according to which a series of teaching strategies have arisen (eg mid-semester questionnaire).

Finally, the last section will complete this evaluative study by suggesting some future actions for fostering peer-peer interaction and enhancing the student-participation in the next academic years.
The academic context of my teaching

Greek art and archaeology in the curriculum of Classics department at King’s

Over the first academic term (2012), I have taught two seminar-groups to first-year undergraduate students on an optional module in Greek art and archaeology at the Classics Department, King’s College London. The course introduces the undergraduate student to the cultural history and archaeology of ancient Greece and it requires no knowledge of ancient Greek archaeology beforehand. The seminar provides not only an introduction to Greek archaeology, but also discusses a wide range of material evidence (pottery-sherds, architectural sculpture, sculpted figurines and terracottas) by having as a chronological framework, the Minoan Civilization up until the Hellenistic period (323–31BC). It examines a wide range of materials (including statues in the round and architectural sculpture), and across a broad chronological spectrum (from the Geometric to the Hellenistic ages).

The course is structured chronologically. Following a two-hour lecture, I was teaching each seminar-group for one hour on a weekly basis. Thus, the sample for this evaluative study is based on 25 undergraduate students which are classified as follows: 16 incoming students from King’s College London, where five of them have selected the module from different disciplines, like Liberal Arts. Last but not least, the seminars were also attended by nine study-abroad students, who have come to King’s through the exchange scheme from the University of North Carolina, one of King’s strategic partner universities.²

Assessment for learning Greek Art & Archaeology

‘Student learning is influenced greatly by the assessment methods used.’
(Kaufman 2010, 330)

According to the Classics handbook,³ the assessment for the full-time students who have selected the first-year undergraduate module Greek art and archaeology consists of the following two components:

1. Coursework (60 per cent): comprises the best of two essays, the first submitted in the end of term 1, while the second is submitted in term 2, each of 2,000 words (max.)
2. Written Examinations (40 per cent): at the end of academic year (May), students are examined in a set of four picture-questions, where they must critically select and comment on 3 out of 4 questions. Each of the exam-questions is graded 10 percent.

By contrast, the study-abroad students who selected the module were marked according to different criteria, whereby there were no written examinations. In particular, the assessment

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of these students took the form of coursework only (100 per cent) and consisted of 2 components: 1 essay of 2000 words (60 per cent) and the submission of 2 commentaries (max. 500 words) on the critical discussion of 2 out of 4 images which were selected by the module-leader (40 per cent).

At this point, it is worthwhile mentioning that the assessment of the module on Greek art and archaeology is conducted by the lecturer of the module and not by the teaching assistants. Thus, I did not have any power over marking and the students were aware of this issue. Nevertheless, the requirements of the seminar sessions I conducted in my capacity as a Graduate Teaching Assistant were as follows:

**Seminar Requirements:** Students were expected to have read the uploaded KEATS (King’s elearning environment) documents (articles/book chapters) each week. Furthermore, they had to contribute actively to discussion, and to give oral presentations tailored to their own personal interests in accordance with the sheet-handout, which was designed by the lecturer of the module.

Given the limited time period of the seminars (1 hour/per student group), the student presentations were usually 5 minutes or alternatively if they were joint presentations (2 students/task) they would last ten minutes.

Furthermore, I have also noticed that whenever I raised the students’ attention to a topic likely to be included on the final examinations, they were instantly alert, highly attentive to the discussion and vigilant in keeping notes and asking clarifying questions about the ‘hot topic’ under consideration. This observation made me wonder about the critical role that assessment has in shaping the learning.

Boud*et al.* argue about the double role of assessment activities which are focused on the immediate task (summative assessment for certification), and on the implications for equipping students for lifelong learning when their future is unknown (formative assessment for learning) (Boud*et al.*, 1999). In the last few years, research has focused on Assessment for Learning (AfL).

Black and Williams, two of the most central scholarly figures in AfL have argued that after some studies, the results indicated that frequent formative assessment enhances the learning experience of both low attaining students and students with learning disabilities (Black and Williams 2001).

As Boud and Falchikov claim:

‘A key purpose of AfL is to foster student development through encouraging students to develop skills in evaluating, judging and improving their own performance. These skills as self-assessors are at the heart of autonomous learning and of students’ future independence as professionals and lifelong learners.’  
(Boud and Falchikov 2007)
In other words, AfL is concerned with achieving the student’s learning for life rather than for the sake of pleasing the teacher when they grade a good student. One of the significant components for the achievement of AfL which I am thinking of to incorporate in my future teachings is the notion of ‘self and peer-assessment’ which motivates students to be involved in the process of learning rather than standing as listeners in the class.\(^4\)

Whereas, Stobart (2008) argues that through the process of ‘self and peer assessment’, students can better conceptualize the key concepts of the lecture/seminars within this socially constructed learning-context, which actively engages the students in the design of the teaching-process. The theme of the importance of student self/peer assessment as a means of enhancing and shaping their learning experience of the module of Greek art and archaeology will be discussed in a subsequent section of the present study.

At this point, it is worth emphasizing that in the discipline of Greek art and archaeology there are gaps in literature concerning the application of teaching theories into practice. One of the challenges is that no scholar since Baker-Penoyre has been interested in writing educational advice concerning the teaching of Greek art and archaeology (Baker-Penoyre, 1903). For this reason, in the following section, the self-reflection of my current teaching practice will be discussed by providing specific evaluative data (eg teaching observations, group-discussion and mid-semester questionnaire) and illustrating the teaching strategies that I have adopted this academic year (2012–2013).

**Self-reflection on my teaching practice: evaluative data**

During the autumn term (2012), there were days that I found myself in front of an audience that was reluctant to learn and unwilling to attend the seminar. In such occurrences, it was very difficult for me to investigate the real reasons behind these behaviours. Larrivee argues that feelings of frustration, insecurity and rejection, can naturally occur in cases where students are silent in class discussions (Larrivee, 2000).

For this reason, during the third seminar, I conducted an informal group-discussion inside the class for assessing the students’ feelings about compulsory presentations/per week. This mutual dialogue between the students and myself allowed me to be more responsive to students’ perceptions and personal feelings concerning compulsory presentations and their own personal learning expectations from the class.

After the group-discussion, I realized that most of the students who preferred the voluntary oral presentations were those who compulsorily attended the seminars of their degree programme. Whereas, the students who were keen on preparing a theme for discussion on a weekly basis, were those who were genuinely interested in the subject matter.

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\(^4\) Some other significant components of AfL are the providing of frequent feedback to students by commenting and praising the quality of the students’ homework or by providing informative feedback on the students’ answers in their tests. See, Black and William 2001: 8.
The last category of students with propensity of learning Greek archaeology is characterised by the following characteristics: Firstly, there are those students with an inherited tendency of learning Classical archaeology, arising from their childhood while they were playing in the garden or in the sea during summer. These deductions arise after personal conversations with the most interested and dedicated students on the subject who actively participated in the class-discussions. Second, there are students who are motivated in learning more about Greek archaeology, after seeing a series of television programmes on classical archaeology, such as BBC Channels four and two, with speakers such as Bettany Hughes and more recently Michael Scott.

Furthermore, the impact of visual learning as one of the biggest teaching tools that has often been discussed by many scholars like Goodhew (2005) who notes that CD-ROMs like Pompeii Interactive facilitate the transmission of knowledge to students who can work through the taught material at their own pace and space. Thus, the use of CD-ROMs related with the thematic tasks of my seminars might be very useful and profitable for my future students. In fact, they could check out educational CD-ROMs (often e-books or electronic dictionaries, like the Oxford Classical Dictionary) available from the Maughan library in the same way as they check out books.

**Evaluating my teaching process for assessing student’s engagement**

During the fifth seminar, I conducted a mid-semester student questionnaire. The rationale behind this initiative was to get essential and vital information from my current students for gauging their feelings, thoughts, problems and issues about our seminar sessions. Every student’s comment whether positive or negative was not only permissible but also very desirable, in the sense that it helped me self-evaluate and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of my current teaching practice.

The descriptive questions posed in the short survey concerning the ‘Seminar Evaluation’ are as follows:

For some questions there was a rate from very good/easy, good/slightly too easy, just right, poor/slightly too difficult, very poor/too difficult and the students had to tick the pertinent box. This rate was absent in the questions addressed as ‘Please write below...’, where instead the students had a large box to fill in with their own personal comments.

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5 www.bettanyhughes.co.uk/tv-film [Assessed on 12th June, 2013].
6 http://michaelscottweb.com/index.php/who-were-the-greeks/ [Assessed on 12th June, 2013].
7 Shao, Anderson and Newsome have been very influential in the evaluation of my teaching practice and the construction of specific questions in the mid-semester questionnaire. See, Shao, Anderson and Newsome 2007: 355–371.
Seminar evaluation: 25 responses

1. How do you rate the reading list(s) provided for this seminar?
   10 students replied ‘just right’; 13 students replied ‘good’; 2 ‘slightly too difficult’.

2. Do you have enough support to learn on your own in conjunction with the seminars?
   7 students replied ‘very much so’; 8 students answered that the seminar-leader (myself) was very approachable and helpful in responding e-mails; 5 students ‘just right’; 5 students ‘good’

3. Are the seminars easy to follow?
   18 students replied ‘just about right’; 2 students answered ‘good’ 5 students answered ‘slightly too difficult’.

4. How useful have you found the KEATS and/or any other seminar materials?
   16 students replied ‘very useful’; 3 students ‘good’ and 10 students ‘just about right’.

5. Please write below aspects of this teacher’s seminar/seminar teaching that you think could be improved and/or aspects that were particularly helpful.
   Having reflected upon the students’ evaluations and my informal group-discussion with the students, I realized that students wanted (i) to gain insights into the motives behind the architecture of Greek temples, (ii) to have more information about exam tips, (iii) to have a short recap of the material covered in the last seminar before the delivery of the new seminar, (iv) to have less readings to do [One response I received was: ‘Too much to learn during the week!’], (v) some of the students wanted more office hours to re-discuss complicated issues, and (vi) finally one student said to me in our one-to-one discussion that he would like to have more handouts with the content summarized.

6. Which of the reasons given below describe why you are taking the seminar?
   i. It is compulsory for my degree programme
   ii. I am interested in the subject matter
   iii. It was recommended to me by other students

From the feedback I received on the sixth question that was raised in the mid-semester questionnaire and in conjunction with an informal group-discussion conducted inside the class, I have pondered upon the following three issues:

• The majority of students in my class attended my seminars due to an obligation for earning their degree.
• Students who were interested in the subject area but were lazy in working over their weekly assignments were visibly unprepared and disengaged during the class-discussion of the next seminar.
• The minority in my class consisted of students who were genuinely interested in the subject-material, dedicated and fully committed in their weekly assignments.

On the basis of the above, I then turned my attention to the associated materials within my seminars. For each seminar, every week, an instruction sheet with questions for discussion
and PDF versions of articles and short book chapters were available on KEATS for the preparation of students for discussion in our next seminars. Reflecting on the comment that I received from a student in the mid-semester questionnaire that the assigned readings were ‘Too much to learn during the week!’, I tried to guide the students by advising them to focus their attention on specific pages in each assigned reading. My teaching objective behind this selective approach was to secure that the students would commit themselves to maintaining a good record in the class by being prepared to discuss the assigned tasks in the seminar handout which was uploaded in KEATS one week before the next class.

This is all very well, the reader may say, but was this selective approach viable in practice? Thankfully, I found that to guide the students to focus their attention on specific pages facilitated their learning process and visibly helped them prepare all the assigned readings. After implementing this technique, the majority of the class had done the preparatory work and was willing to participate in the discussion.

One might say, at this point, that this selective approach might hinder the students conceptualising the subject as a whole theme. I would, however, argue that given the context and the purpose of the seminars, the students had to focus on specific weekly tasks (usually four themes). The aim of the seminars was to help the students focus on the most important subjects taught in the two-hour lecture by the lecturer and not by the seminar-leader (ie myself) by assuring them all that they had learned the most significant thematic aspects of each section of the module by the end. In other words, this selective approach did not reduce their ability to develop a holistic understanding of the subject, which had been the aim of the lecture and not of the seminars.

Some thoughts for enhancing student-participation in future years

In order to face these challenges in the next academic years, my primary teaching objective is to try to engage the students.\(^8\) Student participation is vital in learning, for it helps those who teach to assess the learning experience of the students and evaluate those who work hard in their assignments and those who are lazy or uninterested in doing their homework. There is however, the challenge of the silent students who though might have the knowledge before the seminar, are reluctant to speak either because of shyness or inherited introversion.

To enhance students’ engagement (ie active participation in the class discussions), I will try to apply the following teaching strategies, indicated by particular sub-headings (which

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\(^8\) For the definition of student engagement in small-scale studies, I fully endorse the argument that students should actively take part in learning design and that teachers should respond to students’ needs ‘where the students have reported a collaborative online and academic general forms of engagement’. Given the wide diffusion of online education, unhesitatingly, ‘tools for online based-learning’ are vital for the continuous engagement of students in the learning process. Finally, I was greatly influenced by another target in terms of student engagement, that of ‘extra-curricular activities’, as a great medium of transferring the theoretical knowledge of the students into practice. See Trowler 2010: 17–18.
are the result of the questionnaire/discussion with students) for achieving the following learning outcomes:

**Familiarity with the teaching subject**

According to Biggs *et al.* (2007) students who choose the surface\(^9\) approach of learning are usually surrounded by negative feelings about the learning task: anxiety, cynicism, boredom … such may arise from a requirement to take a subject irrelevant to the student’s program (p.23). Often students have low motivation (Basturk 2005) to learn introductory courses, especially, when they cannot see the direct application of the module to their own field (eg if students come from disciplines other than Classics) or simply the module does not appeal to their own personal expectations and interests (Wild, 1995).

One of my future teaching objectives is to choose a variety of examples applicable to students’ discipline-areas. This development is related to Wild’s conclusion mentioned above that students who cannot see the direct application of the teaching material to their own field might have a very low learning drive for the module. For instance, I have seen that during my seminar on Parthenon and the Return of the Marbles, students coming from the English and French disciplines were extremely interested and keen to discuss their ideas concerning the vexed political and ethical issue of the ‘Elgin Marbles’ in the British Museum. In fact, I was very pleased to see that students responded maturely to the unresolved issue of the Elgin marbles being returned to the Greek government.

Furthermore, a very helpful suggestion by my tutor who observed my seminar on ‘Archaic and Classical Athenian Acropolis’ was to split my class into two groups in a debate format and have them argue the case for and against the return of the marbles to Greece. I found this suggestion very exciting and I will definitely incorporate this format in the next academic year. In order to generate students’ interest and increase their learning of Greek archaeology, a particular emphasis will be placed next year on the afterlife and post-antique reception of Greek vases and statues, including the work of contemporary artistic movements and their appropriation of Classical Greek art (Santagata, 1994). Instances of this artistic appropriation will be studied and discussed in organized student-groups at the Tate Modern Collection displays and in the National Gallery, both located at the heart of London. This change in my teaching practice has been motivated by the informal discussion with my students. The majority of them are willing to see the actual archaeological evidence not projected in slides but displayed in more tangible, visual contexts like museums.

Recognizing the visual impact of my presentations and films in my seminars, my teaching-experience shows that students with no background in Classics, are more engaged in class-

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\(^9\) Another reason can be identified in the design of the assessment which can ambiguously lead students either towards a surface approach to learning or a deep approach to learning.
discussions after the projection of film-clips which aroused their imagination and curiosity for learning more about Greek art. Digital media, like films or 3D reconstructions of ancient monuments appeal to students and make archaeology seem emotionally tangible.

My objective is to foster the students’ knowledge not simply in learning historical facts and learning by heart ancient Greek temples, but also to increase their critical thinking through the visualisation of monuments, artefacts and ancient societies. My experience also shows that the sound and image are powerful and complimentary media for every teacher who aims to increase the thoughts and feelings of his/her students about the material subject.

Thus, one way to familiarise students with the teaching subject who are not naturally interested in Greek archaeology, is to try to engage them in discussions via three ways: (i) the projection of familiar topics-related to their own discipline areas, as exemplified in the above instance (eg Elgin Marbles), (ii) a personal grasp of Greek art via museum-trips and (iii) the awakening of learning after the projection of clips related with Greek art. I think it might sometimes be helpful to assess what is viable and then to see how much more there is still to be done.

**Combating surface learning in Greek archaeology**

In the first term (fall 2012) of the current academic year, after the conduction of the mid-semester questionnaire, I realised that challenging students through constant revisions of the taught material is one of the ways that can lead to progressive learning and success. I applied this methodology in my last seminars, but in the forthcoming academic term (2013–2014), I may apply this strategy in every seminar in the form of a 10-minute quick recap of the previous seminar, which will give students an opportunity to clarify possible doubts or difficult topics, before embarking on the discussion of the new material. I strongly believe that revision is one of the fundamental teaching tools for securing students’ learning engagement not only during their exams but also during their weekly assignments.

The form of this 10 minute revision can be either oral (in the form of discussion) or written (in the form of a short quiz). The written form of revision can be exemplified in the following instance. Before the beginning of the teaching of the new material, I will articulate short quizzes related with the previous teaching themes to students who will firstly answer the questions and then will assess the answers of their fellow students inside the class. This form of self-/peer assessment is a very influential pedagogical measure that facilitates not only the

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10 In the end of my seminars a five minute projection of a clip was incorporated to suit the needs of the discussed theme (eg snapshot scenes from Hollywood movies, like ‘Troy’, ‘Alexander’, ‘300’ or ‘Gladiator’).


12 As Lorna Hardwick has claimed eight years ago, ‘The continued proliferation of popular films with debts to the classics ... is evidence of the continued power of the classics to capture imagination. Once a child’s interest has been caught, learning becomes more independent and effective’. Hardwick 2005: 163.
teacher but more significantly the learning experience of the students by providing them with the necessary motivation for continuing the hard work.

At this point, however, one might recall the argument that memorization and reproduction might be linked to a surface approach of learning (Cuthbert, 2005). My personal feeling is that this habit may be overcome by reminding the students’ of past knowledge and challenging them to recall old information. Furthermore, another method suggested by Baker-Penoyre is that ‘students approach the whole subject with minds laudably free from prejudice, and the teaching time should be spent, not in telling them what has been surmised by modern writers, but in showing them what has been done by ancient artists’ (Baker-Penoyre, 1903, p.4). This argument has greatly influenced me in terms of improving my teaching strategies of the module under discussion.

**Avoiding the ‘monologue-type’ of seminars**

Often, during my teaching, I found myself talking too much in the class due to the scarcity of student responses. This personal reflection has been verified by a comment arising from the peer-observation that little interaction occurred between the students (their interest was all directed at me). Reflecting on this comment and to overcome this issue, in the remaining seminars, I tried to split the class into three groups, to create a pleasant environment that could lead to constructive dialogues, but also to focus the attention that was directed at me. Therefore, this is something that I need to think about further to foster the peer-peer interaction in the forthcoming academic years. In relation to encouraging students to interact with each other more, several scholars have addressed the following solutions.

One solution is to set as a ground rule the peer-peer discussion of an assigned topic for ten minutes – that will be based on readings available on KEATS one week before our next class – before the actual beginning of the discussion between myself, as a teacher, and the students.

**The living and learning experience of Greek archaeology**

In order to enhance the conceptualization of the taught material, one of the innovatory plans of my forthcoming seminars will incorporate planning weekly museum-trips. Drawing on my own student-experience, trips constitute a significant tool for better conceptualizing the material culture of Greek archaeology.

Given the superb location of London with all the museums at close-distance to the Strand campus, it is my plan to organize student-visits to the British Museum, Petrie Museum and Victoria and Albert museums. The organized tours will include talks by expert curators, as well as ‘hands-on’ analytical sessions, where students divided into small groups will be able

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13 I consider the interaction between the teacher and the students inside the class vital for the following reasons: (i) strengthening the relationship of students and teacher, (ii) It facilitates the student evaluation on a weekly basis by the teacher, and (iii) via the active student participation in class-discussions, the teacher can assess not only the students’ individual knowledge, but also to self-reflect on his teaching methodology.
to carefully handle sculpted figurines and Greek pottery fragments under my direction as a teacher and the curators of the museums. The incitement behind this suggested teaching strategy is an argument expressed by Woff (2005), who suggests that ‘Thinking of the museum as a classroom is simply a device, which can unlock talents, skills and pedagogical know-how…’. This rationale is aligned with the self-reflection of my current evaluation on my seminar-teaching of the material culture of ancient Greece.

Another innovative strategy would be to organize student-group visits to archaeological sites in Greece. One idea is to visit – with the students – the excavation of ‘the Hellenistic sanctuary of Aphrodite in ancient Messene’ in southern-Peloponnese in modern Greece. These fieldtrips will be partly funded by the Classics Society of King’s College London in order to help students better conceptualize the archaeological science and gain a practical knowledge of the fieldwork from experienced archaeologists and conservators.

It is essential for undergraduate students who select the module on Greek art and archaeology to be introduced to the scientific processes (eg dating methods of archaeological finds) of an organized excavation. This real experience will be accompanied by discussions around cultural heritage issues – an essential component of the module on Greek art and archaeology – and students will be able to voice their own ideas of how the cultural heritage of Greece can be presented and protected for future years. This public engagement by students with the archaeological surveys or excavations will increase their awareness not only of Greek archaeology but also of the management of the cultural heritage of ancient Greece that consists of one of the vital strategies for preserving the ancient sites for future generations.

So far, we have discussed a number of teaching challenges. Some of these involve creating an opportunity for students to directly experience the conceptualization of archaeological evidence through organized museum-visits and fieldtrips surrounded by expert talks not only in archaeological method but also in conservation processes.

**Tailor-made courses directly to students’ needs**

As has been indicated by the feedback arising from the mid-semester questionnaire, there were some students who wanted to re-discuss complicated issues concerning Greek artistic forms (eg black-and-red figure techniques on Greek vases or to learn more about the motives behind the architectural orders of Greek temples) and theories (eg the transformation of the circular layout of temples into a rectangle).

My main interest around the issue of ‘tailoring a course to individual students’ is sparked by the potential positive outcomes that this approach can offer, especially for students who are not naturally interested in Greek art and archaeology. Harden and Laidlaw (2013) argue that ‘tailoring a learning programme to meet a student’s individual needs offers many benefits but is difficult to achieve in practice’ (p.31). Nonetheless, I truly believe that tailoring the learning experience for a small group of students, in a seminar setting is not a confusing situation. The tailoring of specific learning tasks to the personal interests of individual students can be implemented with the guidance of the seminar-leader.
**Summer School at King’s in Greek art and archaeology**

Another venture which will benefit the incoming first-year undergraduate students at King’s is the introduction of a Summer School specialised in offering introductory and intensive courses in methodology and theoretical concepts in Greek Archaeology (for two weeks) before the beginning of the academic term (October).

This learning experience will be both stimulating and very profitable in terms of learning, due to the intensive nature of the two-week course. The Summer School will provide an invaluable opportunity for those students who have just finished their GSCE in Classical Civilisation or even better their A-levels and do not have any solid knowledge on the theoretical approaches of Greek archaeology. The long-term objective of this initiative, which is currently under discussion by the department of Classics will make Greek archaeology available to any student who wishes to learn or be introduced to the subject, before choosing the module at the beginning of the first term in October.  

**Concluding thoughts**

The present study offers a description of my current teaching practice and attempts to suggest a series of profound teaching strategies for the next academic year. My own reflective response to the collected material obtained either directly from the students, through informal group discussions or mid-semester questionnaire/formal teaching evaluations is that all these evaluations (informal/formal-written/oral) were really helpful in realizing what are the strengths and weaknesses of my seminars. On the flip side, the problems raised acted as guidelines for improving the students’ learning experience by focusing more on the issues that hindered the students during our sessions.

A very influential remark in terms of my own self-perception of teaching is that ‘teaching is not a matter of transmitting but of engaging students in active learning, building their knowledge in terms of what they already understand’ (Biggs et al. 2007, p.22). In the present evaluative study, I focused on identifying problems and solutions concerned with my current teaching practice. There is no straightforward answer to the question ‘How do we learn to become good teachers in academia?’

I truly believe in the phrase that ‘Practice actually makes perfect’ and this is usually achieved by experiencing different groups of students and by self-reflecting on students’ feedback to constantly re-evaluate and change teaching strategies. Teaching ought to be open to scrutiny and should be constantly examined and assessed by both the students (formative assessment) and the teacher (summative assessment). While some might say there is no golden rule for the success of teaching, my personal reflection leads me to the deduction that effective teaching can be achieved via team work, meaning, the mutual cooperation

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14 As Affleck notes ‘a number of current government initiatives are in sympathy with projects like these’. See, Affleck 2005: 167.

between teacher and students with one common aim – not only the conveyance but also the extension of knowledge.

Given the social dynamics of each class, another aspect which often is not very obvious is that whenever the teacher comes across students uninterested in the teaching material, then ignorance or cynical behaviour are not the solutions. Instead, I have developed a system of toleration that allows students time and space to decipher their motives behind their disengaging behaviour towards Greek archaeology. I think it might sometimes be helpful to focus not on what attentive and hard-working students are achieving inside the class, but also, how much more there is still to be done with respect to disengaged students.

My ultimate teaching goal is to achieve long-term knowledge amongst individual students so that they can extend the knowledge acquired inside the class by tailoring specific weekly tasks on the basis of their interests. In other words, each week, the tasks will be negotiable and not obligatory for the students. This method will allow me, as a seminar-leader to tailor-make the weekly syllabus according to different students’ interests. Last but not least, it can be argued that the driving force behind successful and effective teaching should always be based on the enthusiasm and energy of the lecturer not only to convey their knowledge of the subject being taught, but also to enlighten the students on the realization that Greek art and archaeology is the epitome of freedom and democracy in terms of critical thinking. I would, therefore, conclude by saying that one of the strengths of teaching Greek art and archaeology in an academic setting, in front of first-year undergraduate students is a constant challenge for me as a seminar-leader. My main objective is to implement the suggested teaching strategies to increase and maintain the enhancement of the students’ engagement with Greek art and archaeology during forthcoming academic years.

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