Teaching Literature : Contemporary Gothic, threshold concepts social justice and dialogue

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Introduction

The novel is 'the stage upon which the great debates of society can be conducted' (Salman Rushdie, *Is Nothing Sacred?,* 1990, p.7);

Literature teaching and learning is a risky and dynamic experience, an interaction, a dialogue between people, ideas, language, text to create meanings. It is more of a form of praxis than the gaining of a body of knowledge. My pedagogic practice, teaching literature, aims to engage students in active learning, in a dialogue with the texts, considering the arguments and values with which these texts engage, and how they engage with them. Threshold concepts (Meyer, Land and Cousins 2003,2006) inform the strategies I use so students engage with ways in which texts use representation, language and form, in context, to enable transformational learning and change. My work is learner centred, valuing and helping hone the responses and growth of different learners, in different contexts. Constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2007, 2011) ensures a well-planned, managed structure within which to learn and teach, demystification and scaffolding to enable a dynamic interaction between learners, texts and the world, in different contexts. Some technology enhanced learning, along with other accessible active practices, contributes to returning some of the agency to students to construct knowledge. My specialist area, contemporary Gothic literature, enables interactions between learner centred dialogue with the text, and issues of social justice.

Genre and pedagogy interact with work on contemporary Gothic writing because it engages with contradictions and contested knowledge, conflicted views, parallels, sometimes parallel worlds, alternative perspectives and hidden histories, questioning boundaries and breaking silences. I believe that literature should cause us to question what seems given, how meaning is made, knowledge constructed and shared and how histories, experiences are seen differently from different perspectives of culture and context. Working with contemporary Gothic enables essential questioning, problematising and exploring. Learners work together in dialogue with the text, the context, and each other, making and considering their own and shared interpretations. The destabilising of set views, readings and complacencies opens a vital gap for discussion and the construction of alternative interpretations backed by evidence from text and critic and driven by students' own developments of articulated argument.

Background context

Literature is involved in an active dialogue with issues, values and lives through its formal aesthetic qualities, the form and language used to articulate these. Teaching literature helps equip students and teachers alike with strategies to explore,

understand and practice interactions, the dialogue between form and interpretation, and between the learners and the text in the ways in which we work together to co-construct knowledge. But, as with other disciplines, students are not always aware that their role is to respond as feeling and thinking beings, in a space, to make meaning rather than just reproduce the content or others' views. Sharing some of the values and expectations is a useful first step. Learning and teaching with literature is a dynamic process affected by the texts, students, time, place, and the catalytic things we do as teachers, empowering and enabling students with strategies to engage and articulate, and with awareness that they have the right to speak. This is something of a tall order in contemporary university contexts focused on matrices and evidence of impact, often a utilitarian approach that desires measurable production as output rather than transformation and interpretation, always in a dynamic interactive flux. There is something crucial in this meaning making in interaction, this borderline activity of making something new relating and responding to the aesthetics, the intent and the values of texts, and for this dynamic productive empowering interaction, engagement with learners is essential.

Our reading and work with literature is always in a dialogue, between the learners, the text and the world, making meaning. Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) 'transactional '(p xii) view of reading and interpreting, values different readings, and an active reader. . The learners, all of us involved in dialogue together, making meaning and co-constructing knowledge, are involved as subjects, engaged people in a context, and emotions come into play as well as cognitive processes. We engage values and ethics, make choices, debate different readings, through our informed interaction with the ways the texts work. Building on the views of Raphael Samuels and the social, liberal, liberational, adult education traditions lying behind literature teaching, nuanced as it is now with the vital interplay with research, Ben Knights comments, 'we have to use our authority to hold and protect the spaces within which formative interchange between the affective and the cognitive may take place' (Knights, 2001).

For me, research and teaching interact, neither static nor fixed, each enriched by engagement with students and their thought, work, interpretations in different spaces and times. The tools and techniques we use as well as the safe spaces and risky activities we set up in learning contexts should all enable research to come alive as part of learning and teaching. I am always concerned to avoid the imposition of authoritarian readings, the shutting down of debate and interpretation. Developing skills of critical thinking, analysis, and articulation enable us all to engage with the dynamic practice of working with literature.

This means in lectures, seminars and online I ask questions and encourage exploration of critical arguments, sources, the ways texts are constructed and expressed, the context of their production and our reading, and students' views, emerging from this interplay, this dialogue. This is structured in terms of questions, material, and guidance, I provide, but it is also open, since students are asked to find their own sources, textual examples, language to explore the texts and make their evidence based arguments. There is modelling in parts of the lecture and seminar, in critical reading made available, (the process demystified) and in pre-seminar preparation, and assignments there are new questions and issues offered and requested from students so that they can do their own inquiring, constructing in a balance between insider knowledge of various models of responses, ways of researching and the license to explore, argue, create, evidence and articulate.

This interaction is a fired up space of change, the kind of liminal space where transformational learning takes place and troublesome knowledge destabilises, challenges fixed views, leading to breakthroughs in thinking and expression. Discussing this in terms of teaching from a feminist perspective, the work of Patti Lather and the notion of praxis proves useful (Lather, 1998). Lather imagines a liminal, border, boundary space, in which theory and practice interact. Here students take risks in relatively safe spaces and construct responses and make meanings in dialogue with each other critics, texts and the world. It's the interaction between the theory and the practice which fuels the making and articulating.

Knights uses similar terms about border crossings and boundary breaking, building on Bakhtin (1984) when he emphasises this dynamism. 'The difficulty of reading is simultaneously the challenge of creating and performing imaginative systems adequate to represent and change our world, and the enterprise in which teacher and student join is, in a Bakhtinian sense, a boundary activity. Every 'internal experience ends up on the boundary.... To be means to communicate.'(Knights, 2001). In Meyer and Land's terms this is 'troublesome knowledge' because of its challenge to merely received versions, interpretations, orthodoxies and because students are asked to read, discuss, create and share their interpretations, exposing their ways of finding out, how they interact, but in a safe enough context since the rules of response and feedback involve questioning rather than attacking, requiring evidence and clarification rather than disagreement. This works because we establish such rules at the start, classroom trialling and shutting people down is not the aim but perspective must be backed up by critical and textual evidence and explanations of interpretation and argument.

So 'our uncomfortable business', as Knights calls it, (troublesome knowledge) is what Aronowitz and Giroux call 'border pedagogy' (1991), probably because it picks up and encourages the edginess, the newness, as well as dynamic dialogue in the study and discussion of texts – which are never fixed and finished. We bring them alive through various interactions and interpretations and that relationship between the aesthetic elements, in context stimulates engagement with social, cultural and personal issues Teaching and learning literature is always more than a set of skills and tools, but developing a demystified understanding of the skills and tools also helps enable equality, liberalism the social justice aspects since students equipped with critical reading, argument and skills associated with threshold concepts can construct their own understanding of literary texts, and avoid the dominance of an authoritarian, exclusive reading. Engaging with literary texts is always more than utilitarian, involving the imagination and creative responses. A major issue of the engagement of literature, and its study, with issues of social justice, equality, sustainability, value. It is important to make clear this role of literature to negotiate and engage with values, enabling learners to engage with the literature and decode the values it vehicles, debating them, learning about their relationship to context and place. These are some of the important activities which learners engage with which are the outcomes of learning centred dialogues, interaction between text and student.

Theories in practice

In my own teaching of literature I combine across a number of theories and approaches. All my teaching and supervision is based on a belief in learner

centredness and students as co-constructors of knowledge. This means starting with where the learner is, or seems to be, and working with them, using the literary texts, critics, class lectures, seminars, online work and group work. This is used to encourage reading, thinking and writing practices which help learners to critically engage with the work in contexts, in terms of the ways in which it deals with issues, arguments and values. It does this through language, structure, signification, representation, themes, character, rhyme, etc., depending on what the literary form, genre and intent are, and the effects this has on the reader and readers, as far as can be determined.

Knights notes that English is a discipline on the borders, a 'boundary practice' with its roots in adult education, the workers' education association and the tutorial classes of the extension movement. So English is more of a form of praxis than a body of knowledge – i.e. an interaction between people, ideas, language text to create meanings, the pedagogical practice emerging emphasises 'resistance to the commodification of culture' (2014, p. 6). Knights argues that it is 'distinctively not a transmission model of education, but a way of performing and starting the individual reader's journey towards maturity via their interaction with the difficult literary subject (Knights, 2014, p. 6).This rules out the one hour lecture without breaks for me, and following the work of Graham Gibbs, Alan Jenkins and others (1991) I have always lectured with short bursts of information, questioning and modelling, followed by showing something (an appropriate artefact, a clip) sharing something (part of a text) and asking for responses, either short question and answer or rather pairs and threes for a few minutes – to encourage interaction and creation. I often start with a question, and end with one, to promote thought and interaction.

In The Literature Study Guide: Mastering the Art of English? Mildred Bjerke (2014) exposes two historical roots to English teaching as a 'trade secret' (p. 7). On the one hand a belief in its 'transformative power for social reform, 'is 'rooted in the idea of a disinterested aesthetic experience' and on the other a 'more utilitarian and instrumental educational tradition' (p. 8), building on Mathew Arnold's work. I do not want to teach students what to read, how to read it and what to believe. I set up the conditions so that they can learn to do this and practice it themselves from models, interactions, questions, space to argue and develop. Linking the aesthetic (language, form etc) and the social justice and personal response elements of the literary in teaching and learning seem to me to be essential. Derek Attridge (2014) also speaks of the pleasure of reading and the importance of encounters with the 'other' enabled by working with literature, and this emerges very much for me particularly when working with the Gothic, the postcolonial, and the postcolonial Gothic.

Threshold concepts

The study of Literature works dynamically, aesthetically, intellectually and at the level of personal and cultural awareness of values in action through enabling the achievement of the threshold concepts of representation, context, form and language, and interpretation. What I'm trying to do is enable students to engage with its transformational powers. This I do through discussion and dialogue based on modelling personal interaction, the way in which the text expresses itself (the latter is related to practical criticism, in the I A Richards influenced tradition) to expose

the debates and dialogues and gain entrance to them. In this way, the experience of studying English takes place in a dialogue, in praxis and is a transformational, productive exchange in a cultural context with the students. Threshold concepts have been a revelation to me. They help identify ways in which students might learn, interpret, particularly as the threshold concept of representation interacts with that of formal expression, and context. In this interaction it is possible to see that informative and entertaining literary works (or not) engage readers with more than telling a story and painting a picture of reality, they represent an argument, several perspectives and arguments, with which the reader is engaged, working out what is being said while the story is told, the characters develop, the themes emerge. What is said is enabled by how the language, form and imagery, characterisation, the form, what can be hinted, layered in a sonnet or in a short story, nuances, ambiguities, and parallels reflecting the choice of works in relation to each other, and context. In teaching postcolonial and Gothic writing, I became very aware that the cultural and historical context from which a literary text is written, and in which it is read, affect how it can be written or read, articulated, engaged with – and so the vitality of difference emerges.

Meyer and Land define threshold concepts as:

- 'transformative' – leading to significant, and probably irreversible, shifts in perception;
- 'integrative' – exposing previously hidden interrelatedness of something;
- 'bounded' – bordering into new conceptual areas;
- 'troublesome' – conceptually difficult, counter-intuitive or alien.

The four main threshold concepts in English literature teaching and learning are, I argue:

representation – something (signifier) stands for something else (signified), it is more than a copy of the real – using the "real", using character, metaphor, event, theme.. to suggest something a message, values, argument,...

context – the engagement of the literary work with time, place, people's worldviews and values – and with the time, place worldviews and *value*s of the reader

formal expression – this is all vehicled by/articulated by way of the match with, and through the form, structure, language, genre, etc.

interpretation - readers, learners, writers, interact with the text in context opening up new perspectives and ways of looking at the text and the world 'questioning and reading from other perspectives' (Eaglestone, 2000a, p. 22).

Historically I explored the recognition and achievement of threshold concepts in English with a (HEA) research project *Conjunctions and Connotations(2007)* . English teaching colleagues commented on enabling and nurturing students' interactions with and responses to language and form, concepts in practice, enquiry and values, and student showed awareness of identifying and gaining threshold concepts.

The research indicated recognition of the four main threshold concepts in English literature learning, and ways of working towards their achievement. Putting theory into practice is important here. Lather's work (1998) from a feminist perspective argues for praxis, the relationship between theory and practice, crucial in working with theory-informed learning, and teaching with literary texts, where an aim is to engage with the articulation of ideas in practice and to transform thinking and behaviour. Specifically focusing on liminality and breakthroughs, thoughts from the literature engage with understanding, conceptual threshold crossing, and articulation.

Liminality can be defined as when students are on the threshold of deeper conceptual understandings, sometimes becoming frustrated, losing confidence or dropping out (Meyer and Land et al., 2005). Some get 'stuck', finding learning troublesome but nevertheless undergo a transformational, creative experience in the liminal space of learning.

Lather's, (praxis of 'stuck places' could tolerate 'discrepancies, repetitions, hesitations, and uncertainties, always beginning again' (1998,, p.491). Crucially it avoids shutting down meaning .

Individual learners and adult learning theories - I believe in learner-centred humanistic approaches influenced by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers (1969, 2013): 'The tutor or lecturer tends to be more supportive than critical, more understanding than judgmental, more genuine than playing a role. As individuals, students learn in very different ways, and also in a dialogue with each other and the material. They have a variety of issues in their lives which affect their learning . We need to take notice of these. This relates to the atmosphere for learning, of co-construction of knowledge. My desire to start with the individual learner is based on appreciating how very different learners are, aiming to support students in overcoming fears, developing strategies, becoming successful in their learning. This is based in the adult learning theories of Brookfield (1986, 1987, 1992) related to those of Carl Rogers and the notion of *Freedom to Learn* (1969).Brookfield also urges respecting learners as adults, acknowledging and using their engagement with context, personal experience, in individual and group response in a dialogue with the text, rather than reproducing a set of meanings and readings. We are equal as learners, learning together, although I come with the content knowledge and engage a range of learning processes.

Learning styles and approaches

I work with learning styles and approaches as shortcuts to identifying different learning behaviours so that what we do engages students in thinking about how they understand recognising and building on their strengths and working to address weaknesses. Deep and surface learning (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983) are useful here. Graham Gibbs has indicated (1981, 1991)that noone is merely a surface or deep learner, since students tend to follow curriculum signals and the ways we teach and assess to some extent determine learning practices . Surface learning is based on the 'eat and excrete' model, taking in information and returning it to the assessor often without much understanding or retention. Deep learning requires students to ask questions, engage new information and argument with previous learning, in a dialogue with others. For example, they interact in structured group discussions

and feedback, in class or online, seeing other views and answering new questions with new answers by combining across information and perspectives. Lecture attention span is considered as approx.12 minutes so I lecture involving students in responding to questions, discussion and activities encouraging active learning, thinking, problematising asking questions to engage theory and texts. I cut up lectures to enable active learning and feedback to myself so that can see if students are understanding what the issues might be so that I can adjust my coverage of the next item. Interactive lecturing and engaging students takes place with flipped classrooms where they see the videoed lecture first, with questions then work together on the materials and issues in the class – these strategies supporting active and deep learning, the assessment deliberately aimed at the outcomes intended.

Access, widening participation and social justice

In an essay on teaching literature (Wisker, 2014) I situated some of my practice in more political and social terms in the context of Higher Education, post white paper, 'Students at the heart of the system' (BIS, 2011), where funding and commodification of learning and of students are seen to dominate university mission statements and agendas. My argument is that it is crucial to collaborate with students to engage imagination and critical faculties with issues of value, and of social justice. I suggest that 'Teaching and researching contemporary feminist fictions and feminist critical practice offer that priceless opportunity to make a difference' (Wisker, 2014). Martha Nussbaum argues that universities should produce 'Socratic citizens who are capable of thinking for themselves, arguing with tradition, and understanding with sympathy the conditions of lives different from their own' (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 302). She champions the humanities and arts against current philistinism. Ron Barnett, a higher education theorist, introduces ideas of working towards the development of an 'ecological university' existing positively in relation to the 'other', and I align these two value statements with teaching , learning and researching for the public good, as understood in critical, transformational terms. This reinforces and underlies my own beliefs in a form of education that can ultimate benefit both the individual learners, and society through critical thinking, and social justice. Nussbaum states in the abstract to her work that : 'capabilities can help us to construct a normative conception of social justice, with critical potential for gender issues, only if we specify a definite set of capabilities as the most important ones to protect.'(p.302)

Practice – what I do

We make meaning from texts and through dialogue. Texts have designs upon us that go beyond entertainment and enlightening language, though these are also important. They engage us fundamentally with social, political, community issues and this engagement, active, interactive is never totally fixed as different readers make different meanings at different times, rooted in interaction with context and reading practices. Being learner-centred means I must make aims and outcomes explicit, materials available, and then the learning can develop unhindered by the irrelevant worrying, since it is in itself troublesome and transformational and the energy needs so be spent on learning. I find out as much as I can about the ways in which learners learn. All the theories I work with in this respect are not just to guide me in what I think might work with students but to enable the students to reflect on and develop their own learning.

Some of the values statements with which I start my lectures, emphasise the power of literature to engage our thoughts and feelings. This is a lively interaction which I try to encourage among students through involving the person, engaging with the different kinds of learning behaviours and approaches, and ensuring that institutionally the work is on the syllabus and the various critical comment and contextual information as well as my lectures and notes are available on the VLE. This is so that they can begin to engage with the values and contexts the only way through making meaning, making these available what questions enable ideas construction.

I use statements about the importance of literature to enable debate, and ask students to consider these in relation to the three texts I will discuss here. I begin a one and half hour seminar by introducing the ideas about literature being fully engaged with and a vehicle for debate about social values, that story telling is powerful and gives individuals voice, and that their responses to texts also give them a voice. I ask them to discuss the statements and see whether they agree with the attitudes and perceptions of them and whether they can think of texts which have enabled them to think about valued concerns politically. Argument and different perspectives. Then we look at, for example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, focussing on specific passages about how the white ruling class constructed slavery as a commodity issue, and how their voice or those in *Beloved* and Morrison's voice expose this as a powerful denigrating artifice. So the stories of the people in the novel offer alternative voices. Using extracts, I ask them to consider denigrating voices (School teacher and Slave catcher) and alternative views, as vehicled by the returned baby ghost, and the disturbance in the silenced shut minds of those in Sethe's life. I work through critical extracts, and novel extracts, engaging students in specific questions, asking them to identify how the language and representation engage us as readers in the issues. Then they put forward their own views about how the novel works to engage with social justice through using Gothic imagery and scenarios.

Whys use contemporary Gothic writing?

Contemporary Gothic writing, postcolonial and women's writing are all particularly useful in getting to grips with the ways in which language, forms etc. engage with the real and the imagined to question, critically engage. The writing explores, examines, critiques and problematise complacencies and ways of thinking considered mainstream and given, showing them to be constructs, products of time, place, values, perspectives, gender, culture, power.

Selecting texts and extracts which provoke thought, dialogue in terms of what they engage with and vehicle and how they do it, the language, form is important so that the vital link between values, text and reader is clear and readers can be aware of how they make meaning. Lively texts act as catalysts for thought and dialogue, about the relationship between issues, context, the form, language and the reader. I use quotations from authors so we can discuss their statements of engaging values, and using the speculative, the Gothic.

In the preface to her work, *Survival* (1972) Margaret Atwood speaks of literature 'teaching' as a political act. Gothic offers rich opportunities to students to become involved with some of the key concepts and issues in our study of literature. Contemporary Gothic problematises comfortable, given readings of the world and foregrounds issues and practices of representation and signification, and does so through dealing in the imaginary, fantasy and horror to consider issues of social

justice, family, identity power, politics, self, culture. Texts focus us as active readers on issues of ideological influences and highlight cultural and other difference as inflected in discourse, image, narrative structure, characterisation and event using ambiguity, paradox and the crossing of conceptual and other thresholds. Teaching contemporary Gothic provides us and our students with a diversity of difficulties and delights of accessibility, expression and interpretation. Practice with these volatile texts surfaces new fusions between the literary expression enabled by Gothic and practices of learning and teaching which vehicle our engagement with such texts particularly as theorised through threshold concepts (Meyer, Land and Cousin, 2003, 2006) which foregrounds representation, ideology, context and interpretation in relation to interaction and lived experience(ontology) and the critical appreciation and interplay which lead to knowledge and meaning construction (epistemology) through learning teaching reading and writing interactions. Teaching, learning and co-researching the work of in particular, Toni Morrison, Nalo Hopkinson, Margaret Atwood, Neil Gaiman offers a rich opportunity to involve students with ways in which the literary Gothic and speculative fictions can prompt engagement with sustainability, equality and diversity. Their work shows how that is deliberately vehicled through an approach which focuses on gender and power.

Example : Dialogue, learner centredness, threshold concepts contemporary Gothic and values : Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)

There are some texts which switch students on to important social, cultural, personal, politicised issues and *Beloved* (1987) is such a text. It involves students with all of the threshold concepts and encourages transformational learning. *Beloved* is beautifully written engagement with the continued, lived, haunting presence of the damage of slavery. It involves students immediately as individuals responding emotionally and intellectually, in the historical context, They must find out enough (conduct some of their own research) about history to deal with the issues, and manage a balance between the historical, imaginative, supernatural and the social justice issues, the 'riskiness' of this text in interaction since they will find themselves confronted by issues of story, personal engagement, language, the supernatural, and its transformational ability.

I the Gothic module, there is a 1 ½ hr lecture and seminars of 1 ½ hrs, one per group. This affects what we can do, and I modify how we work accordingly (see below). Through teaching *Beloved,* I encourage students to engage with issues of race and ethnicity, historical and cultural context, politics, gender, identity, power and voice and to do this as they develop awareness of the threshold concepts in literature – representation, contextual influence, form, language , and interpretation (Meyer and Land, 2008; Wisker and Robinson, 2009). I ask for their responses to the text, interest, questions, problems (discussion in pairs/threes in the lecture, 5 minutes). Then I make explicit issues which I hope we can consider and add to the ppt slide those issues which they offer as of interest to them so we are constructing the class together. I introduce the issues further , Morrison's points about why she writes and her reception, and comments from critics through Powerpoints and quotation. Powerpoints provide a structure, quotations introduce critical voices to engage with, discussion involves us with the critical issues, self, the text in

interaction, making a response. This is a short introductory lecture form (12 mins) so that there is some guided scholarly input modelling how we build argument from theory, critical extract, evidence from the text, and a storyline or perspective. In considering language we look at how oral storytelling ensures authenticity to the voices, presents interpretations of slavery from the inside, not a closed down chronological story but one which continues to return and be renewed. We consider how using the perspective and voices of both the enslaved /newly escaped Sethe, her family, Paul D and the dehumanising voice of the slavecatcher and schoolteacher gives vital insights into different feelings and perspectives, starts to evidence the toxicity of racism and slavery. I immediately open discussion about those quotations either in the large lecture, in buzz groups or pairs, or through a specific passage, over a 5-minute group interaction in a lecture, a longer interaction in a seminar.
Some other teaching strategies to engage students with the threshold concepts and with *Beloved* in terms of race, gender, politics and literature include:

Providing cultural, historical, and political context for the reading of the works. Because they share knowledge about context and history, this enables students' understanding and dialogue with the texts. Moving forward from rather conventional contextual analysis and response, using critics from African-American backgrounds and statements by the writer themselves can help students to acknowledge that we might not easily be able to recognize the validity of different forms of expression, such as oral storytelling, nor the perspectives of those whose work we read. Students are then able to begin to work with different forms of writing in context and undertake analysis of expression and technique, which avoids appropriation and translation. (see Wisker, 2007)

With *Beloved (*and other postcolonial Gothic texts), it is important to discuss the ways in which the Gothic engages with the imagination, ideas, values, irony and contestation so it can be seen as more than something spooky, scarey or irrelevant but rather a form of expression which employs the imagination as well as historical detail, in a dialogue. I ask students about their knowledge of the Gothic, of ghosts, vampires, and their sense of the relevance and use of these in literature. This often divides the room between those who feel distaste and reject the Gothic as silly and mere entertainment and those who can see how it works with the threshold concept of representation, to establish and elicit a response using the imagination and social, cultural, personal political issues. I back this up with Morrison and Tananarive Due (African American Gothic author, whose parents were civil rights activists) and ask them to discuss what the issues are about reception and intent, what the ways in which the Gothic might give a voice to silenced histories, and involve us in discussing values, identity, power.
One central incident to discuss very closely is the arrival of Schoolteacher and the slavecatcher to take the protagonist Sethe's family back into slavery, a key incident highlighting the dehumanisation underlying slavery. In this shocking instance it leads to the sacrifice of a baby to rescue her from slavery, and in the circumstances of a brutal return to slavery, this sacrifice seen as a less monstrous act than the condition of slavery and the mindset that dehumanises people. The slavecatcher's language dehumanises and infantilises the slaves he comes to catch, comparing them to children, and their worth to animals. We are positioned in his perspective and understand how such a perspective leads to brutality. One of the powerful

achievements of literary texts is the creative positioning of perspective so that we see alternative points of view. This takes the learning directly into the experience and emotions of the learner. I ask student to look at how the language and perspective work to involve us in his views and what that suggests about those views, and the arguments concerning the institution of slavery in this specific instance. They discuss the questions and the passage for 5 minutes in groups then we share responses.

This incident unites realism – the language of the slavecatcher, the moment documented in journalism and historical record, with the Gothic, the supernatural, the reason for the return of a constant haunting spirit, the repressed memory. The haunting (the return of the baby ghost as a full grown woman, into the home) is then seen as inevitable and to be faced and come to terms with, lived through.

I also overtly integrate social justice issues, sustainability, equality, concerns about race, gender, sexuality with close textual reading and promote discussions concerning those issues and the ways which the text vehicles them, so that the affect and the cognitive elements are involved in our discussion. This is done through introducing the issues, then asking students to explore the text regarding language, imagery, characters in specific key moments in discussion in small groups. This encourages students to come to grips with the concerns for themselves. In a longer seminar I ask them to identify passages themselves which deal with such issues, choose someone to feed back, and then present the short passage and the arguments of the group, followed by discussion. I use scaffolding, input, modelling, questioning, opportunities to offer ideas and views, explore the text closely, discuss. I believe that these model ways of dealing with the text, providing ample opportunity to offer personal but managed response, through critical engagement and group discussion. This enables a 'safe' (group, managed by the class context, articulated using critical comments) response to a 'risky' text (it is a 'troublesome' text, it concerns slavery and infanticide). They read closely, engage directly and co-construct knowledge through these interactive practices.

Mike Arnzen notes 'Gothic horror provides an excellent context for learning. It raises the serious questions that allow critical inquiry to transpire. This is, perhaps, patently true of all literary texts, but the omnipresent mode of 'uncertainty' that underpins most works in the horror genre inherently moulds the reading experience into the shape of a question mark' (Arnzen, 2009, online).
Gothic is both entertaining and offers a crafted, legitimate, theorised and visceral engagement with the issues that matter. So it engages students in critical thinking, it nudges the gaining of threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2008) of representation, cultural contextualisation, and the way language and form control and express. It exemplifies and enacts the close relationship between literary texts of all kinds, and meaning, values, agency.

Constructive alignment, technology enhanced teaching and the Gothic
Within programmes and individual modules, the approaches enabled by constructive alignment have been helpful for me. These take note of the kind of context and institution in which we are working, the variety of students, so what is possible, and the structure of the curriculum, which enables or disables learning in every instance, depending on the choice, timing, length, variety of activities possible

In this respect, I am very enthusiastic about the opportunities offered by constructivism and constructive alignment, the matching of outcomes to assessment, teaching and learning and student activity, to exactly what you do as a teacher and what the resources are. I link the learning outcomes approach with threshold concepts and the subject skills and understanding at each level so that the assessment, learning and teaching activities, student engagement and access to resources including rooms, layout, materials, online activities are present and used. I use constructivism as a functional scaffolding which enables flexible, well planned learner-centred, active learning. I would feel like a charlatan if I said I was an expert in technology enhanced learning , but at the level at which I can work with it, in the context here of teaching the Gothic, I put it or really blended learning to effective enough use. It leans itself well to enabling students to engage within structured courses, with complex ideas and contradictory views, and so to explore in scholarly fashion how sources inform texts, ideas are traded and created, and texts them influence future thought and future texts.
Because I believe that we co-develop and construct knowledge in a dynamic interaction between what I might do as a teacher and students do as learners, in different contexts with different texts at different times, I always ensure that the curriculum and our work within it are constructed clearly. (Constructive alignment) learning outcomes are clearly defined, learning, teaching and assessment activities in alignment with these. The structure, intent and processes are demystified.

The curriculum is online, what we do each week is online, so are key critical readings, lecture podcasts, powerpoints used in sessions so students can see where and why the course is going in the direction it does, how elements link and so they can access elements, material when they want to before or after sessions, for pre-reading, revision or assignments.

Our aims and the activities we are engaged in are clear, and negotiated as far as the curriculum allows, modified in response to evaluation data both informal in class and formal in the evaluation cycle. I ensure the complex, critical terms and the discourse of the discipline are demystified, shared in sessions, explored and enacted and used. Some of this can be done through dialogue between students in class talking through questions concerning text extracts. Some is enabled through students working alone and in groups to explore the use of ipads/iphones etc working with texts, sources, references, contexts, critical responses, exploring where the sources and references in a text have come from and the discussing how and why they are used, sourcing and bringing critical terms such as ‘uncanny’ to bear on texts, identifying how and where they have parallels or have influenced popular media such as film advertisement, game and to what ends.

Example 3 Neil Gaiman’s ‘Only the end of the world again’, ‘Chivalry’ and ‘Shoggoth’s old Peculiar’.

I begin early in the Gothic module with introductory work engaging students with the historical contexts. We look at East Grinstead/ US West coast writer Neil Gaiman’s comic, parodic Gothic horror particularly ‘Only the End of the World Again’, ‘Chivalry’ and ‘Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar’ (1999).

Gaiman's short stories replay myths, popular fiction and media, and established work particularly Gothic horror master H.P. Lovecraft, in order to threaten and warn as they simultaneously enable amused recognition. His tales deal with fear and disgust at cultural difference, naiveté and danger of unknown places, threats to identity and the constraints of narratives of gender and power. They do this accessibly, partly through his comic, parodic, ironic undercutting of the terror, a tone and references steeped in a range of British popular comic histories, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, Monty Python, British sitcoms, tinged with the darkness of Pinter's plays and the Californian detective fiction of Raymond Chandler. We explore the intertwining of comic and Gothic horror. The undercutting of the high flown, the self-righteous, the self-assured, the pompous takes his work beyond hybridity.

We also look at Gaiman's particular engagement with his readership through digital interaction and communication which goes beyond keeping us in touch with his blog of travel, thoughts and bits of writing, suggesting direct interaction and that readers can contribute to the creative processes and outputs. Gaiman works through the opportunities of the digital, the capacity for visualisations, reconstructions, replays and immediate imaginative engagement of readers with writer and works. In so doing, he utilises the engaged social critique of Gothic horror, its intense troublesomeness undercutting the complacent, constantly forcing engagement, questioning and re-constructing. Gaiman's Gothic horror is perfect for these new interventions, questionings, reconceptualisations. I post up podcast lecture, online blog, powerpoints, access to Gaiman's blog and to critical work on his writing .

'Switch it on'. Working with students in the seminar, I ask them to explore the influence of Lovecraft on Gaiman by using their mobile phones and ipads to find out both about Lovecraft and his background and period, and then relate this information to the extracts from the stories which influence the three Gaiman stories, Lovecraft's 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' (1936) and 'The Dulwich Horror' (1929). This illustrates how writers work with and from each other's writing, influence and parody. The horror of being alone in a strange place leads to a revelation about being treated as the strange Other, in 'The Shadow over Innsmouth', and how Gaiman uses this in 'Shoggoth's Old Peculiar' (1999) to focus on a lone American tourist, Ben, who finds British bed and breakfast establishments unfriendly and locals in pubs strange particularly since, building on Lovecraft's strangeness, they start quoting from Lovecraft and some using his language (gibbous, eldritch, the Elder gods, Cthulhu). We look together at how Gaiman is influenced by very British humour, from Peter Cook and Dudley Moore to Monty Python and move forward for students to identify issues by relating the strategies used in both comic and horror – defamiliarisation, humans turning into strange objects. Relations to British humour influences are explored by questioning, then finding youtube excerpts of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975). Students are invited to use social media in their own comfort zone, and use of iPad and iPhone to research locations, influences, critical response, and Gaiman's online presence. Gaiman's own constant interaction with his readership through his daily blogging is discussed as is his invitation to become involved with the text. We discuss the relation between horror and comedy and its defamiliarisation through the students' suggestions of more contemporary examples, which change with each group. In this way influences are explored through using digital links, the power lies with the students carrying out the research, and they appreciate about readers'

influence on text and issues of how contemporary writing and media work together and to what ends (alerting readers audiences to issues about the Other for example). I use interactive practices of teaching, learning, researching and assessing, making the most of the involvement enabled by digital interactions, and the personal, cultural, imaginative troublesomeness and transformational thinking offered by Gothic horror channelled through irony, parody, comedy.

Influences and **how this practice evolved:**

Variety of experience My practice developed from studying in 11 schools in 5 countries followed by early teaching and a fascination with learning and research in a secondary school, OU, adult education, a mining college, FE and working with individual learners from 'remedial' electrical wirers to third year Cambridge university students cramming for the tripos, and in large groups at every level. Shifting levels and context means that reflection is essential for that development since, even when very well prepared with a session that has worked for a few years – in terms of content and activities – every new group or individual learner prompts me to work differently. As well as ensuring the essential learning takes place, it has to be nuanced to the way the student(s) work and where we are.

Working with adults - In my OU teaching I realised the adults were more experienced in a worldly manner than I was but that I have something with which to dialogue with them, the textual and critical skills, so that sharing and encouraging the development of these helped them link that experience with new ways of looking at how texts work in the world, and move to create new knowledge, in a dialogue with the others in the small study sessions lasting intensively for a week at summer school, and at regular intervals during the year for the specific courses. In OU literature summer schools (1978-1992) through discussion and co-teaching with talented others I learned how we might engage students with creative writing to explore perspectives This work is interactive, creative and leads to co –construction of shared knowledge

World text and voice –DUET Being involved with DUET (Developing University English Teaching, based at UEA) in the 1980s enabled us to consider literature in practice and engaged with issues of social justice, through language, offering (Colin Evans, 1993), power to the students to engage with the questions and the text rather than listen to and repeat what we told them. This involved student led small group work where they worked without staff to construct their own ideas from texts and critics then present them to others. It shifted authority to the student as a constructor of knowledge. I learned at DUET with Colin Evans and David Punter, about ways in which using perspectives based on being creative open up the perspectives that texts offer, encouraging their own creative imaginative responses to issues in the world and in individuals' lives, through creative writing..

Opening up different readings- Some other catalytic moments have been about shutting down my interpretations. In an undergraduate tutorial reading a Philip Larkin poem, I was confused that the interpretation of an abusive sexual interaction

between a young girl whose 'mind lay open like a drawer of knives' was seen as a painful loss for the male abuser, and the girl ignored. My feminist consciousness might have been born then, but so was my sense that provided you can back up your reading from the text, you have the right to an alternative reading, even against orthodoxies. After that, readings that are contradicted just based on orthodoxy have worried me.

Safe and risky spaces –CHES At the Centre for Higher Education Studies, University of London on my advanced diploma course, I found the history behind the work I was doing that, as Maslow argues, there is a hierarchy of needs – it is difficult to study if the physical space is cold or crowded, or difficult to find, or the atmosphere awkward. I try to set up a physical ambiance, re-organise a room in advance, move chairs, move around the room, construct a shared space which minimises dominance, enables discussion and interaction. I take notice of heat, light and timing of the classes and respond sensitively to both learning issues, and emotions involved in the focus of the learning as well as the response of the learner. When teaching Toni Morrison' *Beloved*, there is the trauma, shock and guilt of the revelations of a history of slavery, teaching Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005) demands discussion of trauma too, and sympathies for the innocent in a context of enforced compliance, while teaching Sylvia Plath's work demands negotiations with depression, creativity, loss of a parent, suicide. I find it important to introduce discussion questions which encourage students to deal with these otherwise hidden issues, without them overwhelming the discussion of the poems. Including some introductory theory, raising the issues without being confrontational, encouraging focussed discussions, these enable individuals to engage as much as they want and need to without overwhelming them, but still seeing the hidden as well as overt issues. I believe literature has a role to play in engaging such difficult social, cultural or individual issues and discomfort plays a part in this, but there is no point in such extreme discomfort that no-one learns and people are left feeling awkward, and silenced. It is crucial to have a risky and safe space in which to discuss, and the text and facility with critical, theorised discourse, with which to mediate discussion and interpretation.

How others might adapt or adopt this practice – Practical advice and tips

My view and my experience suggest that it is possible to be reflective about differences to texts, learners and outcomes, plan well ahead, bring a variety of ways of approaching the texts so that the learner engages dialogue work through staged activities but have a lot of freedom to say and do different things. This can work with online teaching and learning and the research approaches associated, as it can with the choreography of working with a single individual in a PhD supervision.

- Work with the engaging, enabling texts. I have several texts I can use to explore and explain threshold concepts and to engage learners with ways in which we can conceptualise and practice research in literary studies. I would argue that to teach through texts is more useful to enable students engage rather than to insist on disassociated rules and regulations.

- Engage practice, theorised in an accessible fashion so the language is introduced and unpicked and used making ostensibly complex ideas accessible means you can speak the same language. Terms I use frequently are abjection, dialogic, carnival, deconstructionism: none of these are really difficult ideas. I have found it practical and energising to be sure of clarity, structure and constructive alignment, and within that flexibility, openness and opportunities for different readings and arguments to emerge so that view about what texts engaged with and how or how they can be interpreted using theoretical lenses, can be explored rather than a single taught, didactic view being privileged. Opinion is fine, but an argument needs to be backed up in the text with close reading and with some sense of theory so that arguments worked through the text can iterate at several difference levels.

-Start with clear outcomes and share these online and on ppts.

-Produce pre-reading, and online, and use it in sessions so students can access it when they need to, and do it is clearly feeding into their work.

-Flip the class room so that you build on the pre work and engage in active, group learning in the class.

-Teach through involving students immediately through questions in lectures, breaking up lectures with short pair work and small group interactions.

-Use the theorists as jumping off points, through quotation, discussion, and using their theories in action on text extracts.

-Raise risky issues in a safe way with supportive theory and sensitive discussion using text and theory, personal response in small groups.

-Be respectful of different views, encouraging theorised practical evidence to argue different interpretations.

Conclusion

Literature is always in flux because it works on the page, in your mind, at every reading, and differently with each reader and each group studying and discussing it. Dialogue offers a perspective and language, in the class, between individuals, with theory, and with the text. Studying literature is dynamic and my own practice has meant that I am flexible to enable the outcomes of understanding, the threshold concepts in practice, supporting and equipping students to be confident and articulate about discussing the text using theory and reflection, in a number of contexts. Enthusiastic learner-centredness leads to empowering different learning behaviours, space for different feelings, for difficulties with facing the often controversial issues which literature raises, so that issue are not minimised but engaged with. Key engaging and inspirational texts are important here, as are opportunities to engage safely with risky transformational issue and ideas, developing skills of research, argument, and articulation.
My own pedagogical practice is constantly developing, nuanced by the different contexts, texts and learners with which and whom I work. Part of the source of my

sense of dynamic qualities and differences feed into my learner centred practice and grow from working with learners at different levels, in different contexts, something renewed each time I walk into a seminar room, lecture theatre or construct and initiate some interactivity in a VLE.
The innovation in my teaching is based in linking theories and practice, using what I have read, and researched, in one context, learning and teaching, to transfer into practice in another context, teaching literature to undergraduates and postgraduates, and basing my understanding of learning, teaching and assessment to interact, to help develop individual learners, on the everyday and longer term experience of working with these undergraduates and postgraduates in different context

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