

Theories and Textual Practices: A Series of Peer-led Training Workshops for Literature PhD Students in the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures

Rationale and Conceptual Basis

Catherine Bovill's keynote lecture, "Co-creation of learning and teaching: background, evidence and strategies for success" at the University of Edinburgh PTAS Forum in June 2014, explored the origins, rationale, and benefits of curriculum co-creation within higher education. The co-development of courses and assessment practices by staff and students would seem to speak most directly to undergraduate education; however, their underlying democratic principles also are applicable to doctoral researchers' professional and scholarly training. Doctoral researcher education remains a nascent area in UK universities. This means that engagement with co-creative learning and teaching strategies is relatively unexplored at the upper levels of higher education. Furthermore, recent studies in higher education in other countries have demonstrated the benefits that learning community (Romsdahl and Hill 2012; Parker 2002) and peer support-based approaches (Stracke and Kumar 2014) have in developing both discipline-specific and generic scholarly skills. Given the disciplinary heterogeneity within our particular School, this PTAS project will address those methodological challenges faced by its doctoral-level students engaged with literary research.

The Graduate School and Postgraduate Management Committee are currently reviewing the School's provision of professional and scholarly-methods training for PhD students, as recommended by the 2012/13 Postgraduate Programme Review. This provision will be distinct from existing Master's level Research Methods training in the School. This means that, in the spirit of Dr Bovill's keynote, the 2015/16 academic year offers a special opportunity for LLC doctoral researchers to contribute to the development of longer-term training for themselves and their peers. The proposed peer-led "Theory and Textual Practices" workshops, outlined below, will offer the School an opportunity to explore innovative but proven models of research methods and practices training, and these may provide a model for training that could be applicable in other Schools within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS).

This project's methodology is qualitative rather than quantitative, because it seeks to explore a unique student-centred solution to problems encountered specifically by doctoral research students in LLC. Although the proposed solution will have broader applications and implications across CHSS, it responds to the distinctive research needs and environment of senior graduate researchers within LLC. The report that will be generated from this model will be student-centred: the students who provide feedback on the project will represent and will address its designers and its intended beneficiaries.

Details, Aims and Objectives for the Project

This project creates a structured, peer-led programme for literature postgraduate researchers in LLC to help them better engage with the theoretical framework underpinning their research areas at the start of their degree programmes. It will cater specifically to researchers working with literary texts, but will also be relevant to those engaging with critical and cultural theory. It aims to add value to the comprehensive curricular review of LLC's doctoral training that is currently underway, by addressing academic needs that are not met by the current formal regime that comprises course-based training and one-on-one supervision. By inviting suggestions from current postgraduate students and assessing their requirements, the project utilises the expertise of upper-year PhD students to design and lead the series of workshops. It aims to also establish a constructive and collaborative

postgraduate environment across LLC by connecting researchers who are working on similar topics of interest.

The project objectives comprise:

- Carrying out two focus groups, of 20 MScR/PhD students each, to identify their specific needs;
- Solicit applications from PhD students to design and run each of four “Theory and Textual Practices” immersive one-day workshops for 20 of their peers, with all tutoring and pedagogical design undertaken by PhD students;
- Create an output of themed online resources, to support the delivery of the research methods and theories training courses, thus creating an open access resource package;
- Organise an Innovative Learning Week (ILW) event to feedback to staff and students the efficacy of the project, and to disseminate findings;

The project will first entail hosting two focus group meetings of up to 20 PhD/MScR students each. These will inform a report that defines the specific training needs of the students.

Through analysis of this report, the project lead will work with the research assistants to identify four key theoretical areas. They will then invite applications from upper-year PhD students (who will work in groups of two or three) to lead one of four day-long theory and textual practices workshops, each addressing one of those key areas. The successful applicant groups will be responsible for planning and delivering their respective workshops, and provide the associated materials, such as reading lists, which will be disseminated to participants ahead of each workshop. The research assistants will work closely with the workshop tutors to ensure consistency of course design across all workshops. The workshop tutors will attend a brief training session with the project lead on strategies for teaching theory to literature students.

These workshops will take place early in the spring semester of the 2015/16 academic year. We are intending to invite applicants from the LLC postgraduate cohort to attend. Lower-year PhD students will contribute to each workshop, while a small number of MSc students will be also encouraged to audit. Each workshop will follow a similar schedule:

- 09:00 - 09:30 Welcome with tea/coffee
- 09:30 - 11:00 Lecture with time for questions
- 11:00 - 11:30 Tea/coffee break
- 11:30 - 13:00 Participants give individual and/or group presentations (10-15 minutes each). These will be in response to questions set by the workshop tutors prior to the workshop and feed into structured discussion of particularly difficult or controversial concepts within this area of theory.
- 13:00 - 14:00 Lunch - Faculty members and postdoctoral fellows invited to attend
- 14:00 - 15:00 New directions – the workshop tutors will provide two-three 15-minute presentations on recent developments in this theoretical area.
- 15:00 - 15:30 Tea/coffee
- 15:30 - 17:00 Applications - participating students will discuss how and why they will use this particular theory - each participating student gives a 5-10 minute presentation on their proposed research project – workshop tutors facilitate discussion of how they may engage with this theory.

17:00 - 17:30 Roundtable discussion and feedback - reading groups invited to attend and meet students

Through these workshops lower-year PhD students will more quickly be able to familiarise themselves with the most recent developments in their chosen theoretical field, discuss the application of theory to literary texts with fellow researchers, and explore other avenues and strategies of which they may have been previously unaware. This will facilitate the content-specific scholarly training of the PhD programme, as well as provide an opportunity for networking and collaboration within the postgraduate community in the LLC. For upper-year PhDs, taking ownership of organising the framework for their own course will allow them to better develop themselves as instructors for future teaching opportunities within the School and elsewhere.

This project will have a widespread and sustainable impact. The plenary lectures will be recorded as podcasts and uploaded online for a wider audience. The extensive amount of resources that will be generated from this project – including reading lists, further discussion questions, and teaching strategies – will be consolidated and made available for future use in an online repository such as the School website. The workshops will also feed into the existing reading groups organised and led by students in the LLC. We estimate that a total of 80 postgraduate students will participate in the workshops, with an additional 14 PhD students (including the research assistants) involved in the design and execution. The online repository will also act as a resource for the wider LLC cohort of 500 postgraduate students.

As such, this will help to sustain a widespread interest in critical and cultural theory and their application within the School, ensuring that current and future students are equipped with the awareness of, and the necessary skills for, engaging effectively with these theoretical practices. This project will also generate a more collaborative environment for both staff and students in the LLC. Finally, the efficacy of the project will be publicised in an ILW event, which furthers its reach beyond the LLC by inviting other Schools to consider its applicability in their own departments.

The two research assistants will organise and oversee the development of the workshops and necessary resources and materials. The project lead will ensure that the aims of the project are complementary to the research methods training provided by the School, and are in compliance with QA standards.

Proposed Timeline

The project will be research intensive in the initial months before the execution of the workshops. Muireann Crowley and Yanbing Er, the two research assistants, will work under the supervision of Dr Robert Irvine (English Literature) to finalise the structure of the workshops. They will be overseeing the development of workshop in completing the following:

1. July — September 2015:

- Undertake initial pedagogical and background research; in particular liaise with the PG management committee to fully understand the research methods training provision for PhD students that will be implemented in 2015/16
- Design and conduct two focus group discussions with 20-30 current PhD/MSc students
- Develop and finalise structure of the workshops, administrative details such as dates and venue

- Recruit existing PhD students as workshop tutors in line with the academic overview of the workshops
2. October — December 2015:
- Train, brief, and oversee the development of workshop resources by workshop tutors
 - Work with department faculty, current postgraduate students to publicise the workshops
3. January — February 2016:
- Upload and disseminate resources and workshop materials to participants before workshops
 - Organise and execute workshops on theory and textual practices over the course of January and February
 - Document the workshops, including the recording of lectures to be put online as podcasts
 - ILW event held for staff and students to disseminate initial findings of project
4. March — April 2016:
- Consolidate materials generated by workshops in a resource package for future use by postgraduate students, including additional resources such as teaching strategies and reflections
 - Conduct final interviews and focus group discussions with participating students and course design leads; consolidate the research findings from the project
 - Write up project results and report
5. May — August 2016:
- Finalise report findings
 - Attend dissemination conferences with possibility of developing research articles and publication
 - Organise a final meeting with the PG Management Committee in LLC to look at how this project has brought about a better understanding of the research methods training needs of postgraduate students
 - If possible, identify specific ways in which the project could be further continued or sustained in the following year

Current research postgraduate students both have continued interest in peer-led pedagogical development and research, as well as establishing a continued rapport between their colleagues in the department. They will have the opportunity to work closely with their peers both in and outside the department in this project, giving them a chance to better develop themselves as course designers and instructors, as well as to shape the existing research methods support and training provided by the School.

Project Dissemination

Our strategies for the dissemination are twofold - they ensure the ongoing impact of the project on the student experience within the LLC itself, and also that which extends beyond the School.

An online repository will be created for resources generated from the workshops. The project will generate an open access website containing the following materials:

- Theory overview lectures made available online via podcasts.
- Reading lists providing a chronological overview of the theoretical field.

- Reading lists will be organised
 - Chronologically
 - Around key concepts
 - Around critical texts that provide good examples of literary analyses
- Annotated bibliography of 10 historically significant texts within the theoretical field and 5 recent texts (<10 years) that have defined the debate.
- Teaching strategy documents written by workshop tutors.
- A blog will document participants' reflections on what they have learned from the sessions and their future directions for their research.

These materials may also contribute to pre-arrival induction packages for incoming postgraduate researchers. They will also be available to members of the public, thus contributing to the University's civic mission and social impact, and showcasing PhD students' initiatives and research to prospective students. Current PhD students will be encouraged to consistently update and add to these resources to keep them relevant. Specific ways in which the project may be further refined and/or extended into the following year will also be examined.

An event will be held during ILW, which will take the form of a seminar discussion involving the organisers and participants of the workshops. They will share their experiences in contributing to the project, and reflect the ways in which these workshops addressed their needs as postgraduate researchers. Senior faculty members such as the Director for Postgraduate Studies, as well as faculty members and upper-year PhD students from Schools outside of the LLC will be also invited to the event to explore the possibility of carrying out a similar project in their respective Schools.

Works Cited

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