

Contrasts: Teaching English in British and American Universities

Gretchen H. Gerzina

INTRODUCTION

I begin this chapter with a certain amount of reluctance and several caveats. The reluctance stems from a worry that what follows will appear to make sweeping generalisations about the way all colleges and universities in the United States approach the teaching of English Literature, and will put those into supposed opposition with the way that all British universities teach English. Obviously, there will be overlaps as well as oppositions, and just as obviously not all American institutions have the same pedagogical practices, any more than all British institutions do. What follows, therefore, is based almost entirely on my own experiences in teaching in both places, and in my career not only as an instructor in two places, but also as an administrator involved in teaching and learning in the United States.

The first caveat is that, even more than the UK, the United States offers a variety of higher education institutions. Four-year liberal arts colleges, common in the USA, are often prestigious institutions. They are generally private, and usually do not offer postgraduate degrees, or very few.

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Universities can be public or private, and therefore answer to very different constituencies in terms of development, funding, and student funding. In between are what we call community colleges, public institutions offering 2-year ‘associate’ degrees, and the students who attend them vary widely. Often attended part-time by working students, they can offer practical coursework preparing students for employment, or cater to those with an interest in a very particular class (since students are not necessarily matriculated toward a degree, but can also come and go as their interest moves them), or be a very viable and inexpensive stepping-stone toward transferring, after the 2 years, into a 4-year college or university to complete their degree.

My own experience has mostly been at private, liberal arts colleges in the United States, which have rigorous admission selection processes and a largely residential student body, and at larger universities in England. Along the way I have had many conversations with UK colleagues at other institutions about the ways English, as well as other disciplines, is taught in Britain and Ireland, and how that differs from American assumptions about the teaching of English.

There are a variety of underlying assumptions in this area. In the USA, for example, most English lecturers assume:

- that all students will enter our classrooms having had rigorous training in the practice of writing and critical thinking at the university level, not just in occasional sessions, but in entire, sustained, and required courses during the first year;
- that the students will be, or become, capable of developing and supporting independent arguments about the material they read and discuss;
- that students will be studying or ‘reading’ in other fields as well as in English, and that not all students in our classes will be English ‘majors’;
- that there will be institutional support for struggling students, in the form of peer tutors, writing centres, and online resources for citation, development, and support of ideas;
- that there are strict penalties for plagiarism, up to and including expulsion;
- that there will be institutional support for staff at all levels of experience, who can constantly hone their pedagogical skills through seminars, training sessions, and outside lectures;

- that most staff begin their teaching careers after several years of taking postgraduate seminars, followed by individual research projects and dissertations, and often have teaching experience, often by being a teaching assistant to an established professor;
- that, finally, American staff have a great deal of leeway in the organisation, marking, and content of their courses—a great deal of autonomy is taken for granted.

In general, I would characterise the main differences that I have observed in this way: in the UK there seems to be an assumption that students arrive prepared to read and write at a competent university level, so that the university does not need to offer that preparation in any sustained way. In the USA, the assumption is that staff will be diligent teachers and fair markers, available to students, without an overseeing system to ensure this beyond deadlines for turning in grades, and requirements about a set number of office hours (the latter is also true in the UK). I was delighted to see that in the UK we are expected to use the full spectrum of grading options, that these were clearly delineated, and that students accept this for the most part. In the USA, the most frequent grading challenges I receive are from students given an A-. This American grade compression can, and often does, result in grade inflation, particularly amongst junior faculty, who live in fear that poor student evaluations will affect their chances for tenure.

Another main difference in my teaching experiences was that in America, classes meet more frequently, which means that students have a couple of days between meetings to digest and respond to what has been done in the previous class. US classes generally meet two to three times a week, for an hour or two, although some universities do offer weekly seminars of 2 h. I found in England that having to pack everything about a particular book, and accompanying critical readings, into a weekly 3-h session, made teaching very challenging. The length of time of each class meeting itself was not as problematic as the lack of ruminative time between sessions to continue studying and build upon discussion. For example, spreading *Jane Eyre* out over a week of multiple meetings meant that we could concentrate on Victorian notions of childhood and education in the first class, discuss the gothic tradition in the second, and expand to marriage laws and modern postcolonial readings of the text in the third. It also meant that I could be sure that students would have finished reading the book, and that they would have done

so from several angles. When I taught *Jane Eyre* in England, we raced through the novel in one long lecture, followed by discussion groups led by other staff members.

This could happen in large American universities as well, with the 'stand and deliver' mode of lecturing followed by discussion sections, so again my experience likely stems from the kind of institutions with which I am most familiar.

STUDENT ISSUES

The most important overall differences in students studying in the USA and in the UK has to do with length and concentration of study, and preparation for study. As mentioned above, it is normal for all American students to take 'Freshman English', or a formal course or two on how to write scholarly essays at the outset of their university study. These courses involve rigorous and regular writing, often a paper a week and revisions, in order (hopefully) to become proficient at critical thinking, argument, and citation at the outset of their education. This is based on the premise that students have not been fully prepared by their high schools to write scholarly essays.

At my American institution, all English faculty teach these modules, and they are supplemented by staff with advanced degrees in writing and rhetoric. However, it is also common throughout the United States for these to be taught by adjunct or contingent instructors, or by postgraduate students. The modules carry credit, although not for the English major, since all students are required to take them, regardless of their disciplinary area of study. But all English instructors must know how to teach them. We therefore expect that students entering English literary study, whether or not they become English majors—a decision made by the end of their second of 4 years—will be able to write an independent, well-crafted essay, perhaps learning the conventions of any particular discipline along the way. This may of course in many cases be wishful thinking, but at least the groundwork is laid for this before or as they embark on literary study. When I wrote a university grant proposal to offer critical writing instruction to my British students, the committee turned it down. Many of my colleagues considered it remedial work, rather than indoctrination into the expectations for scholarly literary performance.

In many ways the expectations for incoming students in Britain in terms of previously honed writing ability are closer to the Oxbridge model of study and tutorials, and increasingly to the Russell Group experience, than to the so-called ‘civics’, which generally teach far greater numbers of students and require fewer essays. The overall study hours put into any single module or course tends to be much higher at these ‘elite’ universities, but interestingly, according to the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) studies of 2007, student satisfaction also rose with the amount of time spent outside of the classroom on coursework. Edward Acton, writes in the *Times Higher Education* that these studies

also highlighted wide variations between British institutions offering the same degree subjects. Most striking was the yawning gap between the mean amount of study undertaken at Oxbridge and all the others. On average, in comparable subject areas, students at the University of Cambridge spent 40 per cent more hours and at the University of Oxford 30 per cent more – equivalent to a year’s extra study – than students at other Russell Group universities and their 1994 Group peers. Compared with the sector overall, the differential rose to 50 per cent and 40 per cent respectively. The crucial ingredient, especially in essay-based subjects, is Oxbridge’s insistence on a vastly greater volume of written formative work combined with swift and high-quality feedback.¹

The Oxbridge model of regular writing and feedback achieves much of the same purpose as the American model of first-year training in essay writing, but without the need for a dedicated writing course. Particularly striking is the way that this writing workload translates into higher levels of student satisfaction, especially in the all-important National Student Survey (NSS). Furthermore, a HEPI 2009 student experience report also found a correlation between the number of study hours and the ability to succeed after leaving university:

There is, however, a much stronger relationship between study hours and the perceived benefits of higher education in relation to factors such as career preparation and personal development. The investment of more hours of study appears to bring substantial pay-offs after graduation.²

The report compared UK higher education experiences to those of the European Union, but pointed out that ‘study hours’ could mean a variety of things, such as ‘study in isolation’, and could be affected by factors

such as the need to work in addition to study (an important issue with the switch from public funding to student fees). It also pointed out 'the considerable differences which exist in national traditions and their implications for the student experience'.³ What is true, and increasingly problematic, in both the US and UK experiences is the increased pressure on students to land paid work after graduation, placing the humanities in general, and English in particular, in jeopardy as departments try to keep the student numbers up, the courses relevant, and the students satisfied.

The dual notion of study hours and contact hours feeds directly into the way that students of English find support for their work. A cadre of helpers are there for them in the American system, but of course it is up to students to avail themselves of this support. No one forces them to take a draft of an essay to a writing centre or peer (student) tutor, to meet with staff during office hours, or sit down with a reference librarian to find scholarly critical articles. During the first year, however, they are introduced to all these services in their writing classes, with reference librarians conducting full sessions, and tutoring representatives coming in to introduce themselves. These are available to all, and do not carry any stigma. In fact, it is not unusual to find A and B students using these services regularly. Increasingly, however, British universities offer similar services, often through the library and reference services, and also with dedicated staff assigned to help students with study skills.

When my UK colleagues use the word 'remedial' for such services, they are thinking more in terms of large, public American universities and community colleges that track poorly prepared entering students into remedial classes and services. Students at these institutions have often been let down by their high schools, who allowed them to graduate without the competencies in reading, critical thinking, and mathematics that were once the norm in American education.

As Acton also points out, greater contact hours affect too student accomplishment and satisfaction. This can correlate to overall length of study. Students in England usually attend university for 3 years; American students attend for four. In the 3-year degree, students of English study only that subject; in America, liberal arts students are required to study in a number of areas and to major in one (although increasingly in this climate of worry about employment, students are double and even triple majoring). They can easily switch their major subject during the course of study, and it is quite common for a student to apply to the university declaring an interest in one discipline, and later switch to a completely

different major, something that is often rather difficult in Britain. A typical American English major will take between ten and 13 separate courses or modules, depending upon whether their university or college runs on semesters or quarters, and the rest of their courses in other disciplines. Many go on to write a thesis, but sometimes this option is only open to students with a sufficiently high GPA, or grade point average (in the USA, the word 'dissertation' is used exclusively for the PhD thesis, a distinction that caused me real confusion when I first taught in Britain). Others follow the British model of a required thesis but there is generally some sort of 'culminating experience'. This frequently takes the form of an extended seminar essay in the final year, but in best-forgotten previous decades, students had to sit for a gruelling examination, something still practised in some British universities.

American English majors typically will take English courses during every term of study. In my current institution, this means that they carry a full academic load in each of the three terms, whereas my British students use the summer (what we call spring) term to do their written work. So I was very surprised to discover that my British students, even though they read exclusively in English subjects, were actually reading and writing less than their American counterparts, and furthermore had little or no formal training in writing at the university level. In my American college, students typically graduate having taken 36 courses (modules), whereas my English students graduated with 18.

The difference of course is that the American and British students probably took the same number of modules in English, but the American students took as many again in other disciplines, not only following their interests in fields such as economics, pre-medicine, government, and philosophy, but also fulfilling requirements in such fields as foreign language study, and science and technology. Furthermore, my American students in English frequently studied abroad. One of my British colleagues commented that American students in his classes were able to bring in a variety of approaches, such as philosophy or anthropology, to literary conversation. But he also remarked that his British students had read more literature. Some may disagree with the American model, arguing for depth over breadth, but others find that it leads to well-rounded students who are conversant in a wider variety of things when they leave university and look for jobs.

However, this is also an increasing problem in the UK as well. I was surprised by how little my English students had read, both before

arriving at university and while they were there. Some had only about a dozen literary novels under their belts, and not that much poetry or drama. A friend reported that she was giving her high school arts students copies of classic fiction because they had only been required to read selected chapters in preparation for their A level examinations. Many of my students in their final year of English study had not even heard the names of major Victorian authors, let alone writers of earlier periods. It is the rare American university that does not require their majors to have comprehensive literary period study. Many of them also read beyond the assigned texts. While the detractors of modern English studies decry the advent of theory-focused professorial research, and suggest that we teach authors like Toni Morrison over John Milton, the fact is that American students read and study a broad spectrum of literary texts. I was surprised to have my students in England ask which of the assigned texts they needed to read, as though doing all the reading was, like attendance, optional.

These points are, of course, very subjective and anecdotal, and without more sustained research that takes into account the enormous number and variety of American colleges and universities, as well as the varying requirements for the study of English in British universities, any blanket comparisons are necessarily circumstantial. One of my American students studying in Scotland reported that she worked hard to offer an original analysis of a text, only to be told that developing and supporting an original thesis was something that should be done at the postgraduate level, and that undergraduates were only expected to demonstrate that they understood the readings, lectures, and discussions. Yet my discussions with British colleagues uniformly suggested that developing and supporting an original thesis, using scholarly resources, was precisely what they expect their students to do. Just as they do in America.

STAFF ISSUES

Staff in American departments of English have a great deal of autonomy in selecting texts, setting deadlines and lengths for written work, and in handing marked work back to students. Guidelines and standards are decided by department consensus or practice, and dates for turning in final marks are set by the registrar. However, it is certainly possible that no one actually knows what requirements their colleagues establish unless they are being reviewed for reappointment or promotion. As

department chair, I read all annual reports, but did not necessarily review each syllabus except for those of junior faculty. Even then, they usually had a faculty mentor who would hopefully guide them through the shoals of new teaching, and their research production. These mentors did not have an obligation to report back to the department; indeed, it was deemed important to keep the mentoring function separate from an evaluative function. However, other departments and institutions may handle this differently. For example, a course syllabus could be posted on the internet for all to see, with copies kept in the department office, or only handed out to students on the first day of class. All of these things were more codified and organised in the UK, with requirements about due dates, number of texts, word counts for essays, and essays turned in or returned anonymously through an office.

I had never, until I taught in the UK, given out a list of assigned essay topics, but this is not necessarily the norm. Instead, I give out prompts during the run of the course. When a student makes a particularly astute comment or observation I generally tell the class that this would be worth pursuing in a longer essay. Because this can make students uncertain, I coupled this practice with extended office hours, where students can come to discuss their plans for an essay. In the UK, I remember with curiosity an occasion when in the USA a dissertation student came to my office and worried that she might be using up too many of her allotted meeting times. She was equally surprised when I responded that that is what I was there for.

All this is different in the UK, where module booklets are written months in advance, and once they are printed, there can be no deviation. This came as a complete shock to me, since I was accustomed to being able to make changes and tweaks as it became clear what the students needed to learn, and the best way for them to do this. So, when I thought through the module further, and decided—weeks in advance—that I needed to require very short (500 words) of weekly writing on the books, I discovered that this idea must go to committee to approve the change. It took several weeks before the committee met, during which time the students were turning in this work and improving with each week. The committee took the decision not to allow this extra work during that term (although it was approved for the future). When I told the class that it could no longer count for points, but encouraged them to keep it up, they not only dropped the writing, but fell behind on the reading and indeed began to skip lectures entirely.

Had this been in the USA, I would have had an arsenal of measures to take. First, no one would question my changing the assignments and points before the course even began. I would have been able to take attendance, and count it in the final mark. In the end, it was the inability to predict and count attendance that was most frustrating. Plenty of American faculty do not believe in taking attendance, or making it part of the requirements, and it may be that I am an outlier in this respect. I learned the hard way the Oxbridge tradition of only attending lectures that one perceives to be directly relevant to a particular essay or exam. The balance of power, it seems to me, lies with the students in these cases, not with the professor who has spent a week preparing a lecture that is ultimately delivered to only a handful of students. Seminars, however, tend to be well-attended in both countries, suggesting that the lecture model may not be the most effective mode of teaching in either.

As with lectures, British students made less use of my office hours and availability. They also rarely used email, even to retrieve important information about classwork. American students, like students all over, prefer text to email, but ‘get’ the idea that most professional interactions take place through email. They email their thesis and topic proposals, ask for feedback, and expect replies—perhaps too quickly (often my reply is to tell them to come in person to discuss it). If I email something to a class, I get numerous responses almost immediately. If I sent emails to my British students, they rarely read them. They claimed that this was because they got so much ‘unimportant’ email from the university that they rarely checked their accounts.

All of these are specific differences between the two systems, but there is another that I find more complicated because it is more pervasive and a solution is less straightforward. I have spoken about the leeway Americans have to design their English courses and their assessments. Staff in both countries work equally hard, and often at lower pay than the public expect. However, there is a cultural difference that filters down into every aspect of teaching, writing, and administration, and into departmental culture. Americans in general (and this is obviously a huge generalisation) prefer the visionary over the bureaucratic. That is, when a problem arises, they ask, ‘What is the problem? What is the best way to picture it and think of other approaches to resolve it? What is the big picture?’ The British tend to start at the level of detail, of the nuts and bolts rather than the big picture. For example, when one British university—taking its lead, I presume from American universities—decided to begin

a centre for teaching and learning, they immediately wanted to start in punitive ways: vetting each instructor's module booklet, making lists of what needed to be accomplished in each class, planning a website before they had any content to upload. There was no 'big picture' discussion about what such a centre ought to be or do, before setting up a series of rules about how to do it. There seems to be a mentality designed to tick boxes.

Such centres are long established in the United States, and they exist to help staff find best practices: the best ways to help students learn, the best ways to approach developing a lecture or a discussion, the differences between courses that involve memorisation and those that approach big questions, innovative ways to make use of technology. They do not exist to be punitive, but to help staff to be the best teachers they can be and the students to be the best learners they can be.

Many American, and British, staff carry that ethos into the classroom, but too often in the UK bureaucracy trumped learning. For example, Americans often use the first class of a module to inspire, excite, or intrigue students, to make them want to continue with the course, at the same time that a certain amount of business needs to take place about expectations and rules. (I for instance, ban screens in the classroom. I prefer not to have students texting or posting on Facebook while we are discussing *Native Son* or *Mill on the Floss*). Yet instead I found that in Britain the department representative could come in and take the first half hour of what was to be an inspirational opening to remind students to fill out certain forms, participate in certain surveys, and attend certain meetings. Can that not wait, I asked, until the last part of the class?

Studies show that the instructor who challenges and inspires (and by this I do not mean 'entertains'), even when the material is unapologetically difficult, gets the highest ratings. This is important, because English is notoriously difficult to fit into prescribed 'assessment' boxes. Assessment is increasingly the name of the game on both sides of the Atlantic, and yet how do we come to assess what a student studying Shakespeare has learned, as opposed to a student in chemistry? How do we assess whether a student has gained a larger vision of humanity by reading *King Lear*, or been challenged to understand a character like Bigger Thomas, the victim of racism in 1940s Chicago who is also a murderer? Yet this is the very thing that we offer, even as we are required to quantify it and assess its 'impact' in the world outside of the academy.

CONCLUSION

Despite all these differences, we are employed in a common mission in the teaching of English Literature on both sides of the Atlantic, and come to this work through a deep appreciation of the subject and a desire to transmit the rigours of scholarly research, critical reading, and the importance of this to human understanding. In both places we as English professors are increasingly challenged instead to demonstrate ‘return on investment’, and to demonstrate to the wider world the monetary value of such study. A university education is no longer viewed by many as the training of the whole person, but as a necessary stepping-stone to a career. With the increase of student fees and student debt, English instructors in particular find themselves forced to do two seemingly opposing things: to produce and publish careful research (for the Research Excellence Framework in Britain, and for tenure in America), and to find ways to offer students ‘training’ that will translate beyond textual analysis into quantifiable outcomes. Here, rather than in the particularities of systemic differences, is where we need to make common cause.

NOTES

1. Edward Acton, ‘How can universities support students to work harder?’, *Times Higher Education* (hereafter *THE*), 17 October 2013 (Edward Acton 2013).
2. John Brennan, Kavita Patel and Winnie Tang, ‘Diversity in the student learning experience and time devoted to study: a comparative analysis of the UK and European evidence’, Report to HEFCE by Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (The Open University, 2009), 4 (Brennan et al. 2009).
3. HEPI report (2009), 31.

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