Welcome the crisis! Rethinking learning methods in English studies

David S. Miall [a]
[a] College of St Paul & St Mary, Cheltenham

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Welcome the Crisis! Rethinking Learning Methods in English Studies

DAVID S. MIALL

College of St Paul & St Mary, Cheltenham

ABSTRACT   *Dissatisfactions with current teaching of English are caused by a misalignment between recent theoretical understanding of the subject and teaching methods which remain largely concerned with interpretations of texts. A model of student-centred learning is described, which offers specific answers to four problems: student motivation, the acquisition of methods appropriate to the discipline, how to transfer authority from texts and teachers to the student, and the issue of accountability and staff appraisal within the English department. It is argued that a shift to student-centred learning allows students and staff to share a common concern for the nature of the discipline, and to recognise and make productive use of the theoretical dissensions within it. Some salient features of a method of student-centred learning in English are described.*

Introduction

Perhaps by now everyone has heard that there is a 'crisis' in English studies. But the need to rethink one's subject is often reflected in its more mundane aspects. Discussion of the learning that takes place in the department of English in which I work is sometimes dominated by one problem: students do not read enough for their work in English. Our external examiner has pointed to the narrowness of the reading undertaken even by our most competent students: students frequently seem unwilling to go beyond the literary works and critical texts explicitly listed for their courses. Worse, it is not unknown for students to arrive at seminars having not even read the play, poem or novel set for discussion that day.

For their part, students tend to complain of one particular difficulty in the work they do in our department. From quite early in their first year, as evaluations and comments have shown, some students sense a lack of coherence in their study. Either the course we offer seems to them fragmented, without progression and with no relationship between the different components, or they see the lecturers themselves as differing widely in approach, and surmise that there is no agreement within the department on the aims of the course.

Despite these problems (which, I shall suggest, are less problematic than they seem), such students often go on to produce work of the highest quality, comparable with the best that is done elsewhere. Moreover, as one mark of the academic success of the course, several students each year go on to graduate work in English or a related discipline. As must surely happen in many undergraduate programmes, the reason that our students succeed in their studies is that sooner or later they discover where in the subject they are most competent, and the system of study we provide—which includes some unit options, and always includes a choice of alternative questions for assignments and examination—eventually allows the student to focus her [1] effort mainly on that part of the subject. This helps circumvent both

of the problems identified above: students read seriously only for those parts of the course they feel competent in, and they tend to select options within the course taken by the lecturers from whom they have learnt to feel some competence. Partly because of us, and partly in spite of us, students do become more competent.

Yet the problems remain to perplex us and each new generation of students. Every year some students are unwilling to read enough, or read at all; and it is true that we, as staff, do not agree sufficiently on the aims of the course. I will suggest that such differences between staff, which students tend to see as incoherence, can become a source of strength. I argue in this paper that a planned shift to student-centred learning is required: this will make the first problem (insufficient reading) disappear, and show that the second (lack of staff agreement) is a necessary and potentially fruitful part of our subject.

The focus of this paper is on English studies, and I suspect that, with modifications, the approach may be applicable to other humanities disciplines. But I shall not be concerned to look beyond English in this paper, since the premiss of my argument is that pedagogy within a specific discipline should be based on our understanding of that discipline. Thus concepts such as *motivation* or *accountability*, which I deploy later, take on a specific meaning in relation to learning within the discipline of English. A more general learning theory can have only a general relationship to the problems within a given discipline, and will thus influence the practice of subject specialists only weakly or not at all.

The paper is in three parts. In the first part I describe some salient features of the student-centred learning methods which I have implemented in the English classroom. This will provide a perspective for the more theoretical arguments that follow. In the second section I examine the assumptions behind our present approach to English studies, assumptions which tend to determine how English is taught despite those radical shifts in theory and content in recent years which have led to the so-called crisis in English studies. In the third part I compare student-centred learning with more traditional modes of teaching dominated by the curriculum and by tutor-led sessions.

1. Managing Student-centred Learning

A method for managing student-centred learning in the English classroom will now be outlined. I have employed each of the methods to be described over the last three or four years, and obtained comments and evaluations from the students who have participated. While this paper is not a report of research on student-centred learning (some empirical studies of learning methods and literary response are given by Miall, 1986, 1987, 1988), I include a few representative comments of students, made during evaluations.

1.1. *Identifying the Aims of the Course*

A constructive way to introduce course aims and obtain a measure of commitment from the students is to work with them in devising a learning contract (cf. Buzzell & Roman, 1981). While it is important to make clear to students what your aims are as tutor, it is also important to enable students to identify their own aims. This is an especially useful task for the first session of a first-year course, when students are least clear about what is expected of them in higher education, and when they are least likely to have confidence in their ability to contribute to and shape their own learning. The learning contract will also later assist the evaluation process, and can be referred to periodically during the year when conducting evaluations.

These are among the aims that were proposed by students in a first-year unit 'introduction to poetry' (I improved the wording when typing up the aims):

(1) To acquire an appropriate vocabulary for discussing poems, either in seminars or essays.
(2) To use personal experience as a resource in responding to poetry, and to become aware of ways in which poetry may transform such experience.
(3) To learn how to listen to the comments of others about a poem, whether these differ or not from the apparently 'accepted' readings of the poem.

A number of the comments made by students at the end of the first session suggested that the work on the learning contract was a useful exercise in itself. One remarked that it was "good to put the aims in formal categories—sorts it out in the mind". The preparation of a classroom ethos in which individual response was to be respected was also welcomed: another student felt that it would be "valuable being able to express one's point of view freely".

1.2. *Methods for Studying Texts*

In studying literary texts under conditions in which the tutor refrains from offering interpretations (a point discussed in more detail in the next section), the tutor's first responsibility is to offer students ways of studying the texts for themselves. This involves systematically presenting a range of methods and giving students experience in using the methods and discussing their outcomes. For example, students can devise a structure plan for a poem: How can it best be divided into sections? What could we call the sections? What is the relationship between the sections? Another method is to find the main ideas in a poem, then ask what is the contrasting or opposite idea in each case (and ask if that contrasting idea is also in the poem); and it can be helpful to classify the ideas (according to which ideas refer to emotions, perceptions, objects, evaluations, etc.). Other methods are described in Miall (1986).

Student response to such methods will vary according to the text and the student: the primary task is to give students experience of a range of methods so that they will be able to ask appropriate questions of a text for themselves. The student will never be at a standstill because she cannot readily see a meaning in the text. Once the student has been taken through a variety of methods, the tutor can then safely leave the student to choose or invent a method appropriate to the question they wish to explore. In this way students are encouraged to be more autonomous in their learning; but we first provide them with the skills to enable such learning to be productive.

1.3. *Small Group Work*

Often the most stimulating context for the student using a specific method is to work with others in a small group (four students in a group seems ideal). It is often appropriate to have students work individually on a task first, then to share the results in groups of four, and finally give a report to the whole class: at this point, the tutor can usefully contribute by summing up or by pointing to alternative ideas that no group has expressed. Usually students benefit from having to argue a point of view with other students more than they would benefit from discussion with the tutor. Moreover, the individual student who would never contribute to a large seminar discussion will be ready to contribute in the more intimate context of the small group.

These are some typical comments on the experience of group work, made by first-year students after undertaking a task on a poem:

> Other opinions made me re-think my own ideas or strengthen my appreciation of the poem. Very helpful in solving problems or things I didn't understand with other people. Hearing other views was very enlightening—saw other aspects. Pool other ideas, starts even more divergent thoughts, perhaps deduce what was correct or incorrect. Removes some of the 'blinkers' from your eyes.

The main problems with group work tend to arise from a student who cannot listen, or one who dominates the group, or a student who has no ideas to contribute even after undertaking a specific task. Thus the tutor should also have methods to offer students to help them resolve such difficulties within a group (Jaques, 1984).

1.4. *Group Records*

To enable students to benefit from the work done in each small group and, cumulatively, in previous weeks, one can keep group records. I adopt the practice of the English primary classroom: I ask each group to produce material for display. A web of classified ideas, or a diagram of the meaning of a poem, is placed on the noticeboard in the seminar room at the end of the session; I also place a copy in a seminar folder kept in the library. This practice allows for another and often more productive type of accountability than essays or examinations, as I will mention below. It also provides a record for revision as the examinations approach.

1.5. *Resources*

It may be appropriate to issue a course handbook, in which methods are described and worked examples provided. Sources for further reading can be given. In one course I teach on Romantic literature, I also provide a bibliography of some 300 items which is available on a computer sited in the library: students learn to use a simple data base program to consult it. By this means, students who have located particular problems or areas of inquiry in their group work, are able to pursue their interests in the literature on that topic more independently. Student comment has generally been favourable: "I have found the bibliography most useful for my assignment, and for finding information for individual poems. I use journals more than I ever have before." "Found the key words as indicators to certain areas very useful. Directs you straight to an article which otherwise would have been very difficult to find."

1.6. *Lectures*

Where I feel that lectures are necessary, I encourage students to think about and respond to the lecture rather than take notes on it: I do this by placing my lecture notes on file in a folder in the library. In addition to lecturing on topics that I have chosen, I also encourage students to suggest topics for lectures, or I give lectures when questions have been raised by students from their group work.

1.7. *Evaluations*

A key feature of student-centred learning is enabling students to reflect on what they have

learned and how they have learned it. In some classes I ask students to make a brief (and anonymous) evaluation of each session in the last five minutes, using pages from a duplicate book so that the student keeps a record of their own evaluations as well as handing a copy to me. In other classes I obtain evaluations at less frequent intervals (say, once a term), devoting 15 or 20 minutes to a more formal evaluation (the students can be asked to help devise the format or the questions). The report of the more formal evaluations is always typed up and placed on the noticeboard for the students to see. Any difficulties or problems that students raise can then be dealt with immediately, often during the next class.

2. The Problem of Interpretation

The features of student-centred learning that I have described are those that I have implemented in the context of my institution: other contexts may require other methods. The fundamental issue is that the learning methods adopted should reflect one's view of the nature of the subject. Present-day teaching of English, however, often exhibits a curious contradiction between philosophy and practice, which has historical roots.

In the days of the New Critics, in which it was unprofessional to ask questions about the affective meaning of literary response or about the intentions of the author, attention was focused on the meaning of the literary text in itself. Classroom discussion and lectures had the purpose of refining and correcting students' grasp of textual meaning, often by reference to an agreed body of critical interpretative writing—for example, from Johnson on *King Lear* to Heilman and Danby. What English lecturers offered, following this tradition, were interpretations. These days the theoretical assumptions have changed, but too often the classroom methods have not. Now, it may be, students are asked to contemplate a Marxist or a feminist view of *King Lear*, but what the student is being offered is still interpretations. In fact, given the distance of the centre of gravity of certain theories from the literary text, as well as their difference from the experience of literature of many post-A level students, the necessity of guiding students into the interpretative practices authorised by such theories, and doing so by example, seems more or less obligatory. But as a result not only the text, but the student too, becomes captive to professional interpretations.

The method I have been describing is what I call *systematic instruction*, and despite our best efforts to make the method systematic and instructive, to provide a well-balanced curriculum, and to encourage the students to think for themselves with challenging assignment questions, the outcome of such methods is that the learning that actually takes place in the classroom often appears *ad hoc* and irrational. Students take on board only part of what they receive, and extract what methods they can from the range of conflicting approaches to which we expose them. In this we betray the principles of our subject and the critical theories we espouse.

A major implication of the more recent theories of literature which have displaced New Criticism is that literary texts reflect and often challenge the ideology of the culture within which they are written and read. A classroom in which the learning method does not embody in practice this critical questioning of ideological assumptions, runs directly counter to both the function of literary texts and the premises of recent critical theory. By continuing to offer interpretations, however these are authorised and however important their implications, teachers of English make themselves agents of an ideology of control, in which both the literary texts and the critical theories dominate the student instead of enabling the student to gain interpretative authority in her own right. Under these conditions the good students are mostly those that learn to play the game which they observe, guessing correctly what the preferred interpretation must be.

The alternative is to accept at face value the conflicts that inhere in the origin and function of literary texts, and seek to model classroom practice on their implications for learning. Learning, in other words, both for the students and their lecturers, should model the discovery and mapping of the problems involved in the existence of literary texts and in the various critical approaches to them. This is why students require specific methods for approaching texts: these facilitate group discussions oriented towards problem finding, rather than problem solving. Learning is thwarted and discussion foreclosed if I, as tutor, present solutions to problems in the form of my own interpretation. Literary texts are not pre-packaged solutions to problems. Why should learning about them so often make them seem so?

Thus the relationship between textual meaning and the conditions of learning must be thoroughly reformed if we are to make genuine learning possible for our students. This is, of course, likely to lead to fundamental changes in both curriculum and assessment (cf. Heron, 1981). The next section focuses on the conditions of learning and their implications for interpretation.

3. Two Methods of Learning

Learning in the classroom takes place in a social context; but the characteristics of each individual's learning will vary considerably. To overlook either of these factors undermines both the learner and the discipline we represent. Student-centred learning foregrounds both factors in the classroom, with the purpose of deriving learning advantages from their presence. The advantages can be analysed within four main dimensions, where student-centred learning is differentiated from traditional, curriculum-based learning: motivation, method, authority and accountability. (I am indebted to Sylvia Chard's model of the differences, which I have adapted for the purpose of this paper: Katz & Chard, 1989.) The four dimensions are summarised in Table I. More detail of specific methods can be found elsewhere showing how student-centred learning can be organised and worked towards in practice (cf. Bleich, 1975; Habeshaw, Habeshaw & Gibbs, 1984; Jaques, 1984; Miall, 1986).

TABLE I. Systems of learning in the English classroom

Systematic instruction	Student-centred learning
(1) *Motivation* Motivation is extrinsic, provided by the course structure and the tutor, backed up by regular assessment	Motivation is intrinsic to the student arising from her specific interests and background knowledge
(2) *Method* The tutor selects the topics for study and is in control of teaching methods	The student chooses topics for study and the learning methods to be used
(3) *Authority* The tutor is the expert, the student is deficient	The student is expert, knowing her own level of interest and degree of background knowledge
(4) *Accountability* The tutor is primarily accountable for learning	The student shares accountability for learning through systematic reporting and her contributions to group work

3.1. *Motivation*

Where does interest in a text come from? At first, interest for the student is likely to come from the ability of a text to speak to the student's own experience and current concerns and its ability to question the student's culture or its historical sources. Later, when students have read more, texts will also speak to a student's emerging subject-centred interests, such as the relationship between successive periods of texts, or the meaning of textuality in itself, or the nature of the reading subject. We cannot prescribe such interests to students, although we can point to where such interests may be found. Interest is intrinsic to the student: the experience and knowledge that the student is able to relate to her reading will determine the nature and quality of her transaction with the text. Out of her specific interests, the student will generate the questions which will inform her work, her contribution to seminar discussions, and her ability to recognise and respond to the interests of others.

In systematic instruction, however, the organisation of students' work is determined by the curriculum. In most cases this means that there is a sequence of approved texts upon which lecturers deliver lectures and which students are required to read and discuss in seminars. The pattern of students' study is driven by external constraints, including periodic assessment by assignments and examination. Such courses are easy to design and appear relatively easy to teach. Among English lecturers there is still a large measure of agreement about what are the major periods of literature and which are the more significant texts on which a core curriculum is built. We can all readily agree that by graduation any English student must have read this play, that novel, those poems. That much is self-evident.

Under this system the primary source of motivation for the student is external: it is provided by the curriculum and by the pattern of assessment. Student interest and commitment is assumed. Under this system, unfortunately, student interest is likely to be intermittent and unreliable. If the curriculum is laid down, the student has no incentive to ask why a text is significant; there is no occasion to ask the question. Moreover, under a system in which the status of the text is predetermined, it is apparent that those who so determined it must also hold the key to the meaning of the text. We conspire to support this assumption by spending the major part of our class time talking about the meaning of texts —usually offering our own preferred interpretations. Is this why students sometimes arrive at a seminar having not read the text? But why read the text if its status and meaning is already decided? Why not just note what the lecturer says about it, since his position makes him the spokesman for the text?

This particular dilemma was well described to me recently by one student. She remarked, describing occasions when her tutor was becoming anxious at the passivity of the seminar group: he "decides to dictate his own views upon the subject in discussion; the result of this is that the whole group feel like their own views are invalid, and they wasted their time preparing the work in the first place."

Motivation, oddly enough, is usually the last thing to be considered in designing courses, despite the rhetoric about student interest and self-development that usually informs our published course aims. But the design of a course reflects our beliefs about the nature of the subject. If we really believe that students should find the subject interesting we should stop telling students most of the time we are in contact with them why we find it interesting, or, worse still, setting up seminar discussions in which students have to guess why we find it interesting. There are as many ways to be interested in a text as there are students in a classroom, but whatever the student's point of entry to a text, discussion can be organised to focus on the text as a series of open questions, whether textual or contextual, or

both. In this way the interest of the individual student can be deployed to help map the boundaries of a question; other students will contribute from their own perspectives.

If literary texts engage us as readers in questions about the self and the culture in which we are situated (cf. Fish, 1980, p. 336), then the nature of the discipline and our classroom practice should model that dialectic. The practice of systematic instruction not only falsifies this approach to our subject but it also risks damaging or destroying the sources of students' motivation. For this reason we should aim to modify or largely abolish systematic instruction, and put in its place a system of student-centred learning in which the interest of the student plays a primary role in determining both content and method. If this can be achieved while also enabling students to acquire the concerns and authority of scholarship, it will be a result both of the classroom methods that are available to students and the system of accountability that we agree to operate.

3.2. Method

In systematic instruction the tutor is in control of the meaning of a text. In student-centred learning it is the class of students which is in control of meaning. The focus has shifted away from interpretation of texts offered by authorised scholars (however worthy, well-informed, or up to date), to methods of inquiry that can be deployed by a given group of students with the resources at their disposal. Thus the first role of the teacher will be to show students a range of methods for analysing texts and organising their discussions about them. In time, from the various methods that have been made available, each individual student will choose the method that best fits her level of understanding of a text and her particular interests. In some classes the student will also eventually be able to choose which text or group of texts to work on.

The use of specific methods means that attention is not directed first to the meaning of the text as such. Seminar discussion under systematic instruction is too often stifled by that opening question, 'Now, what is this text *about*?' This question, which only the most courageous or foolhardy students will be prepared to answer, forecloses more productive kinds of discussion: the possibility that the text is *about* several different things, which may not be compatible; that a text may be a process rather than a given quantity of meaning; that a text may sometimes be more interesting for what it is *not* about; that the most interesting aspect of the text for me, here and now, may be that it is about me, or an experience I have had, or the situation in my family. More fundamental, this question effaces a whole series of other more fruitful and answerable questions regarding how we come to know what a text is about. How does a text come to have meaning when we read it? And if the text is a problematic one, as will frequently be the case for students who are coming to it for the first time, how can we get to see any meaning in it at all?

The methods of systematic instruction bypass these questions because the tutor already knows what the text is about, and it is the tutor who determines how the student will acquire the same knowledge. Thus the problem for the student becomes: how does the tutor know what the text is about, and where in the text and its critics do I find the evidence which shows what it is about? It follows that the alert student in a seminar will set herself to second guess the tutor in order to find out how he arrived at his understanding. Most of the other students (as lecturers often complain) sit back and let this student and the tutor play out their game, taking notes as the evidence is revealed and hoping not to be called on to participate. Perhaps this unjustly caricatures the productive work that can take place, but the picture is a logical outcome of systematic instruction, where lecture or seminar sessions are tutor-led, and where the primary function of the session is to offer interpretations of texts.

The main advantage of student-centred learning is that it transfers control of literary meaning to the student, and shifts focus onto the methods which can be used to study texts. The emphasis on methods is enabling: it gives power to the student, and authorises the readings of texts which she is able to make. There are a number of significant implications in this move. The plans which are made for studying texts emerge from the interests of the student or of a group of students, instead of being determined by the tutor or the curriculum. Such plans are more likely to sustain productive activity across a series of sessions, or several weeks of a course, instead of the activity each week being determined by the tutor's lecture or reading list. Activities arising from a range of specific methods for approaching texts are more likely to inculcate skills which will generalise to other texts and other courses; under systematic instruction the student's activity is focused instead on a given interpretation, during which it is fortuitous if any generalisable skills are learned. In student-centred learning, which is based on methods and the formulation of questions about texts, there is greater emphasis on making productive use of a range of resources to support learning, including personal experience, other students, reference materials, the library, the computer. In systematic instruction it is the tutor who controls resources, acting as the gateway to what will count as a resource by the issue of reading lists and by setting prescribed textbooks (too often causing a bottleneck in student demand by placing a small amount of relevant material on reserve in the library).

Thus student-centred learning encourages experiment, individual and group initiative, and the maximum use of a range of resources; systematic instruction on the contrary encourages caution, conformity and playing the system. Under student-centred learning it is the student who chooses an approach, and a level of difficulty, appropriate for her stage of learning, whereas systematic instruction assumes that all students are at the same level and require the same degree of instruction. Under student-centred learning errors and mistakes are occasions for learning; under systematic instruction errors are a failure to achieve the standards set by the tutor.

3.3. *Authority*

The methods of student-centred learning also lead to a greater awareness of the reflective and critical powers of the student herself: student-centred learning encourages self- and peer-evaluation. The student is increasingly led to internalise the criteria for judgement appropriate to her area of study, as her contributions to group discussions and group tasks are evaluated by other students and incorporated in group reports and other outcomes. Under systematic instruction, by contrast, the tutor is the source of assessment; only the tutor can make reliable evaluations of the student's work. This keeps the student bound to the apprentice role, dependent on criteria which are often not made explicit and which may vary unpredictably from one tutor to another. In student-centred learning, by contrast, the social context within which the student operates provides a regular and comprehensible framework within which the more valuable and productive contributions of each student are validated. As a result the student gradually gains in authority. Narrowness or eccentricity in judgement is more likely to be identified and corrected under a system where each student is frequently required to contribute, compared with traditional seminar sessions where some students do not contribute at all.

There is another dimension to the question of authority, arising from the way literary texts come to be selected for study in the first place. The question is not why certain texts become canonical, although this question has received much attention recently. If there is argument over curriculum, it is likely to be over apparently more marginal issues: how much

explicit literary theory to include, how much literature by non-native English authors, whether creative writing is part of the discipline. That these issues appear marginal actually reflects an interesting light on our attitude to the core curriculum. To enshrine the major texts within our curriculum is to risk misrepresenting the historical origin and function of the texts, to erase their relation to contemporary ideology, and to ignore the cultural forces that determined their status as major. It is, in short, to locate the source of authority in the major texts themselves, and by association, in the lecturers who guard the canon and determine the mode of its transmission to students. Faced with these twin bastions of authority, many students quite naturally display an attitude of passivity and dependence.

But the status of a text at the time it was written is likely to have been problematic: texts only gain canonical status later. By asking what the relation of the text is to its culture, by seeing the text as an interrogation of contemporary cultural norms and assumptions, we enable students to bring the authority of the text into the foreground as an issue for debate. Those areas of the curriculum which have been marginalised then become precisely the most useful tools for questioning the origin and cultural position of the text. Thus, we will want to ask: What theoretical claims were made by the author or his supporters for the purpose of the text? What current literary theory enables us to examine the status of the text and the nature of its readership? Similarly, to give students experience of non-English literatures and of creative writing offers two other important perspectives on the status of texts. These alternative approaches to the text authorise the student to ask questions which traditional teaching largely ignores, since under systematic instruction the canonical status of the texts is taken for granted.

If we are to dismantle the authority of the text, as recent literary theories have insisted, we must also dismantle that other authority invested in the teacher. Under student-centred learning authority is progressively transferred to the student. The student's study of English develops first under the influence of her own experience and concerns, where she is her own best authority; then her study becomes progressively more systematic and culturally informed as methods are acquired for studying texts and negotiating shared meanings in the classroom. With authority, however, comes responsibility, and it is this area that I discuss last.

3.4. *Accountability*

The question of accountability arises whenever we exercise a particular power or privilege or gain the right to do so. The question is relevant to English studies as much as any other domain, and is perhaps particularly critical now, given the 'crisis' in English and the changes in the status and funding of higher education which are imminent. These matters may seem somewhat distant from the discussion of classroom practice which has been the main concern in this paper, but I will suggest that in reality they lie at the heart of our professional interests as teachers of English and, perhaps more than any other topic, call for our urgent consideration.

Under systematic instruction the primary form of accountability devolves on the staff who guard the professional status of the subject: the staff award marks to students' work and eventually give degrees to the students who demonstrate that they have acquired the knowledge and methods authorised by the discipline. Until now this has been the accepted practice, and it has been inconceivable that we might govern our affairs otherwise. But now it is apparent that institutions of higher education will be putting into place some form of staff appraisal. Not only will appraisal be used to monitor the effectiveness of individual lecturers, but each department will be expected to provide indicators of its performance in

relation to the costs of the institution and the service it offers to its 'clients'. Against this coming framework for judgement, a discipline which is defined by canonical texts and by the methods of systematic instruction provides only weak and highly dubious criteria. Not only is it now less possible to define what English studies is (hence the 'crisis'), but the knowledge acquired by students under systematic instruction has no evident power to inform any area beyond the discipline itself, and certainly has no role in the economic world beyond the campus. In the coming order we must expect that traditional English studies will lose in authority and gradually be starved of resources and students.

But there is an alternative English studies able to take its place in the new order, and able to propose the conditions under which the work of staff and students should be appraised: it is the view of English studies which emerges under the system of student-centred learning. Here the emphasis has shifted: away from the transmission of accepted interpretations of approved texts, to the posing of questions about the status of texts and their role within a culture. Students no longer study prepared solutions to others' problems, but adopt the role of problem-finders, formulating the questions that arise from their own experience and interests, and devising methods for pursuing such questions systematically and in constructive debate with other students. In student-centred learning there is also a shift to self- and peer-assessment. How useful are the questions? How effective are the methods? Are available resources being used appropriately? Student-centred learning progressively gives the responsibility for learning to the student and hence also gives the student the primary role in judging these issues.

Thus accountability for learning, including the use of resources and the development of new skills, is shared between staff and students. It is the responsibility of staff to enable students to deploy methods appropriate for the questions that are being asked, to provide the facilities that students require; it is the responsibility of students to account for the learning that is taking place by contributing to reports in seminars; also of account is the value placed by others on the further questions to which their work has led. Reporting, as I suggested above, may take other forms besides the verbal seminar paper; for example, by the use of noticeboards to display materials, diagrams, example analyses of texts; by the use of learning journals or a data base of resource materials available for others; by staging dramatic presentations. Under systematic instruction, by contrast, assessment—the writing and grading of essays—too often remains a private affair between tutor and student, in which the learning that has taken place makes little or no contribution to the life of the classroom. In student-centred learning most of the learning has outcomes which are visible and can be shared by others, to the mutual benefit of all.

If we turn to the issue of staff and departmental appraisal, it is apparent that English studies now has something to offer of major significance beyond the boundaries of the discipline itself. Our methods under student-centred learning are enabling ones: they facilitate learning about the subject, but they also produce skills in the formulation of research questions and the devising of methods of research which have the power to generalise to different contexts and different subjects in the world outside. In working towards criteria for appraisal in our departments (which we must help to devise), we can argue that student-centred learning already has built into it a system of accountability which speaks to the main concerns of appraisal: the learning that takes place has its origins in a rational approach to the questions of concern, the development of methods of inquiry, the use of resources (whether physical, such as spending on library materials or computers, or the allocation of staff time) and the transferability of the skills learned to the world outside the institution.

In this framework, appraisal should emerge from the nature of the subject and the

means by which students acquire methods appropriate for their inquiries. Whether appraisal will take this form is not yet decided; if it is, instead, based on performance indicators that disregard the nature of the subject and the quality of the learning that takes place, so much the worse, one must say, for English.

Conclusions

What of the second complaint I mentioned at the start of this paper, that students sense a lack of coherence about the aims of the subject and see that staff differ in their approaches? A system of student-centred learning does not resolve this problem, but it does provide a context in which it becomes explicable and even a source of strength. English itself is no longer a coherent discipline, hence the 'crisis'. It is not surprising that the contradictions within the subject should be reflected in the differing perspectives of staff: our department is probably fairly typical in this respect. The work that remains to be done is this: instead of seeking to suppress the differences, so that they are reflected to students only in a muffled and incoherent manner through divergent course structures and conflicting demands made on students, we should seek to foreground our differences as a necessary and productive basis for questioning the nature of the subject.

The difference of position between two colleagues on, say, the issue of the autonomy and unity of the text, will sooner or later emerge as a question from the interests and inquiries of the student. That is to say, either the student herself comes to pose the question or the question can be proposed to students by staff as one worth pursuing. In either case the student has available as a resource two members of staff who represent the arguments on each side. The responsibility of the staff concerned is then twofold: first, in allowing the question to be put clearly, with the possibility of revealing its various implications and cultural sources; secondly, in providing students with ways of pursuing the question by pointing to possible discussion methods, ways of focusing the question, modes of reporting, the location of key resources, and the like. It would of course be possible for the two staff concerned to stand up instead and present two lectures on the issue, or stage a debate in front of the students. But the occasion for such contributions from staff should probably be kept to a minimum. Learning that is initiated by the student from her own interests will almost certainly be more effective.

The divisions in the subject should also be reflected to students in another way. It is possible for the individual lecturer to model the debate within the subject through the example of his own research. Most research involves the pursuit of specific questions about the status and meaning of texts, whether the texts are literary, theoretical or historical. Such study requires the assessment of conflicting evidence, a discussion of previous contributions to the debate, the formulation of hypotheses to guide inquiry. In this respect the lecturer can demonstrate his methods of inquiry to the student, showing how research questions are formulated and pursued. This rationale justifies the giving of one or more lectures within a course. Such lectures will not fall into the mode of systematic instruction, since they are concerned not with fixed and given interpretations of texts but with the methods and implications of the act of interpretation itself.

This assumes that staff who give lectures are actively engaged in research; it also assumes that such staff are involved in some significant area of current debate within the subject, familiar with the books, journals and conferences where the debate is taking place. By the means of such lectures, as well as their own inquiries, students become increasingly aware of the nature of the subject, its current research questions, and the methods of inquiry commonly practised within the subject. The more able students will thus be well equipped to

pursue research degrees themselves once they have graduated. In this way, within the framework provided by student-centred learning and staff research, there is a genuine continuity between staff and student interests and a shared concern in articulating the nature of the subject.

In conclusion, we must recognise that the reason why students do not read enough, or why they sense a lack of consensus among staff, is not primarily because students lack commitment or because we cannot find ways of talking to one another. This may be the case, but the major reason is because we have failed to consider deeply enough what the implications of our learning methods are and to see that inadequate methods breed lack of commitment and the lack of a productive dialogue about the subject among staff. This paper has pointed to some of the causes of that dilemma and outlined an alternative way forward based on the principles of student-centred learning.

Correspondence: Dr David S. Miall, Principal Lecturer in English, College of St Paul and St Mary, The Park, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL50 2RH, United Kingdom.

NOTES

[1] Since over 70% of the students in my English classes are female, I refer to the student by the feminine pronoun.

REFERENCES

BLEICH, D. (1975) *Readings and Feelings: an introduction to subjective criticism* (Urbana, Ill., National Council of Teachers of English).

ROMAN, O. & BUZZELL, M. (1981) Preparing for contract learning, in: D. BOUD. (Ed.) *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning* (London, Kogan Page).

FISH, S. (1980) *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press).

HABESHAW, S., HABESHAW, T. & GIBBS, G. (1984) *53 Interesting Things to Do in Your Seminars and Tutorials* (Bristol, Technical and Educational Services).

HERON, J. (1981) Assessment revisited, in: D. BOUD (Ed.) *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning* (London, Kogan Page).

JAQUES, D. (1984) *Learning in Groups* (London, Croom Helm).

KATZ, L.G. & CHARD, S.C. (1989) *Engaging Children's Minds: the project approach* (Norwood, N.J., Ablex).

MIALL, D.S. (1986) Authorizing the reader, *English Quarterly*, 19(3), pp. 186–195.

MIALL, D.S. (1987) Learning in autonomous student groups: learning skills as a predictor of satisfaction, *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 13, pp. 175–183.

MIALL, D.S. (1988) Affect and narrative: a model of response to stories, *Poetics*, 17, pp. 259–272.