

Diversifying Assessment

Reviews, reading dossiers, assessing
students in seminars

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Reading dossier

Description of initiative

A double second year option, with an intake of twenty students, 'Popular Writing', has been redesigned to increase the amount of time students allocate to note-taking and independent research prior to completing their own extended piece of academic writing. Previously, students participated in a series of seminars, each one introducing them to a new 'genre' of popular writing. Having selected a related topic, they were assessed by draft essay proposal and by an extended piece of academic writing. Tutors had noted a growing tendency amongst students to leave preparatory research, evaluation of sources and planning for the extended essay until the second term. Students were increasingly treating this unit as a dissertation option, selecting the seminars they attended and asking to write extended pieces on authors and genres not included on the course.

There are several ways of making the importance of good note-taking and research skills more explicit to students. Many departments offer study skills units or research skills booklets. Elsewhere in the School of Humanities, Film tutors have productively asked students to compile a dossier for a first year introductory film course. Students are advised to include lecture and screening handouts, notes relating to all essential reading and background texts, all preparatory material relating to essays and any additional material including press cuttings, notes taken from further reading and screening notes made about films not on the course.

Taken overall, we found these film studies students beginning to think more carefully about what they were noting down from the material they were asked to read and view. There was clear progression, for example, in the quality of the screening notes which the students were making. In one dossier, in about the fourth week, the student started to write down details of the film to illustrate elements of *mise en scène*:

King Kong Screening

Spotlight title sequence
Est. shot of harbour
crazy voyage - Karl Denim - wants best pictures
secretive
little Monkey 'Beauty and the Beast'
Finds necklace
knife in Kong's hand - sympathy
saves Fay Wray
POV shot of planes

A few weeks later, taking screening notes for *His Girl Friday*, the same student seems much more assured and the notes make more sense. The student is more confident about what they are seeing, the techniques used and the significance of behaviour, props, scenery etc.

His Girl Friday

Newsprint est topic + intro title and
The tracking shot.
She's popular, flirting with partner
Hildy Walt - both decked out in expensive clothing
She doesn't have too high an opinion of Walt. Walt seems to want Hildy back...
Use of deep focus
Press room scene fills in some of the background info

Building on the evidence of improved student learning, we decided to redesign 'Popular Writing' to include a reading dossier. The added value of the reading dossier was its potential to improve student understanding of the primary and secondary reading set, their ability to think critically about that reading and the use to which they should put it, and their ability to communicate their own insights.

Previously, students had not been required to submit anything more than a draft proposal at Christmas. In the new assessment design, we ask students to complete and submit a reading dossier as well. The dossier was to include notes made during seminars, notes made for seminars on primary and secondary reading, and notes on any extra reading. Continuation to the second semester is now conditional on completion of the dossier. Students submit the dossier with their draft proposal and are asked to evaluate both using a form. As a result we have found that feedback and dialogue between student and tutor, about the scope of the research required for their extended essay, has improved.

Ways of using reading dossiers

Because our version of the reading dossier focuses on the learning experiences going on in seminars (we encourage students to include preparatory notes for, and notes made during, seminars), we devised a series of exercises and guided questions to help students write up seminar notes and practise their note-taking and research skills. Independent learning, informed by collaborative learning, is at the heart of the reading dossier project. The reading dossier is premised on the theory that writing about new information or ideas enables students to understand better and remember them. It also contends that reflecting on course content – making notes on the notes – generates more insight and connection than merely taking notes and thus fosters the habit of questioning which is at the heart of analytical enquiry.

We explain the purpose and function of the reading dossier in the very first meeting of tutor and students.

Guidelines for keeping a reading dossier

As part of the course, you need to draw together any handouts and any notes you take – during seminars and during viewing and reading – into a dossier. I also strongly recommend that you write notes on these materials, summarize group discussion and continue thinking about issues raised in your own time.

The dossier should be a notebook of your reading in the area of popular fiction and culture which you need to hand in with your proposal in January. You can also use the dossier to help you write your proposal. Any additional reading on theory and texts you may do in the course of the semester should go in your dossier, and build up your own bibliography in addition to my reading lists. I am the only person who will see the dossier, but in doing so I will be better able to help you with any problems you may have had with the reading, questions you might have, and also help you to identify your strengths. The dossier enables me to help you get started on the long essay element of the course and helps you to remember what we have covered and what you have thought and discussed with everyone else throughout the course.

Preparatory reading groups

In the first session we hold with students, we also ask them to practise writing up seminar notes for inclusion. Last year the tutor selected a controversial piece from Mickey Spillane's novel, *I, The Jury*, for a discussion of what makes writing popular. The tutor recalled that the session was hard work – and dominated by the male students in the group. The students told us that they found the piece difficult and they were not sure how to position themselves as readers:

'The Mickey Spillane piece, I remember that! The last line!'

'Oh I know, the one with the lady in the hat! That was about feminist issues.'

'When the tutor said the last line justified it and brought it out of the depths, I found the last line was the most insulting. The men justified it by saying he may come back...'

'He set that to show that all popular fiction provokes a response.'

When writing up their notes of the seminar some students used their dossiers to try out their own interpretations of the text and to deal with its problematic nature.

Passage seems to be written by a male for males. Writing for mass masculine audience fits into Anglo Saxon tradition (WASP), because it seems to rely on people recognising the Madonna/Whore attitudes to women. Anglo Saxon, European, familiar to USA culture, universal knowledge of USA to some extent. Good writing? The male point of view in the passage seems to be accepted as the universal point of view e.g. 'I was only human', human being = male. It reads as a male fantasy. Something that men would fantasize about but be too scared to face it if it happened in reality. He describes her through her physical attributes e.g. her shoulders, legs, muscles on thighs...Very stereotypical view of a slightly dangerous femme fatale. If there is pleasure to be gained from reading this passage it is likely to be gained by male readers.

We also made sure that the students had the opportunity to define themselves as readers of popular fiction by asking them to select their own text and argue for it in the next session.

The value of having the reading dossier on hand to work out responses is underlined by a comment made by another student:

'I think it is good to write down because there's going to be your own reaction, and the seminar reaction which is not necessarily the same.'

Experience suggests that many students (particularly Literature ones) find it difficult to accept that the popular fiction their grandparents and parents take on holiday with them is worth studying. On first reading popular fiction, many are also often disturbed by the stereotypical representations of gender and race. The formative exercise outlined above was designed to raise their awareness of some of the issues surrounding the study of popular fiction. The next stage was to move them from their personal experience to a position where they were able to take notes and conduct research in the field independently and with confidence. Having asked the students to discuss primary texts which many of them felt distanced from as readers, we asked them to read some theoretical reasons for and against the study of popular culture. We had quite distinct aims for this second session, which were as follows:

- To allow the students to experience some of the approaches to popular culture which they could follow up and use to interpret popular texts.
- To provide a strategy for reading secondary texts which takes into account their nervousness before the literature.
- To help them shape sources to support their own interpretations.

Exercise 1

Preparatory Reading: Leavis, F.R. (1994) 'Mass civilisation and minority culture', in Storey J. (ed) *Cultural theory and popular culture: a reader*, Basingstoke: Harvester Wheatsheaf. Storey, J. (1994) 'Popular Culture', in Storey, J. (ed) *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: a reader*, Basingstoke: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Fold a piece of paper in half. On one side, summarize Leavis's key points. Be declarative, stating your reading as though you're sure of yourself and the author's intentions. Begin your writing with a description of the critical text and what it means.

Now on the other side, begin your statements with 'But something bothers me...'. On this side, question your assertions of what Leavis is saying. Think about contradictions, about what the sentences do not say directly. Relate what is said to personal experience and subjective responses. Do not censor the outrageous or the improbable. (Meyer: 1993)

Exercise 2

Divide into six small groups. Each group should take one of Storey's six ways of defining popular culture and summarize the key points in their section.

Whole group convenes to compile a summary of the whole section.

Back in groups, prioritize the ways of making meaning from popular texts which Storey describes and which you prefer. Why do you think you will find these more interesting and satisfying ways of reading, discussing and writing about texts than the others?

Include a write-up of your seminar notes in your reading dossier.

This time the dossier provides students with a place to rewrite the authoritative arguments of required secondary reading in their own words. In later sessions, we increase the difficulty of this task by asking students to read selected secondary texts in conjunction with primary ones. The secondary texts get increasingly harder and are drawn from film criticism and cultural studies as well as literary theorists. The process is intended to give students greater confidence in their own interpretations of texts, and confidence in using criticism from other areas of study. When reading *Dr No*, for example, the same student who backed-off from Mickey Spillane writes with more confidence in her dossier, supporting assertions with references to the text. She also summarizes Tony Bennett's refutation of Umberto Eco in *Bond and Beyond: the political career of a popular hero* (Bennett & Woolcott: 1987).

Have to contextualize Bond within time in which he was written about. Coming in when Britain is no longer dominant in world power ... Fears and anxieties about WASP domination. Bond has to defeat Dr No and help girl. P. 118 Honey teases Bond about strength he might not have – 'perhaps it's weak'. Doesn't have power.

Eco analyses Bond novels in terms of a set of contrasting pairs, a pair of characters such as hero/villain, or hero/woman; and pairs of values cupidity/idealism. In Fleming – the villain is a bureaucrat and the hero is an improviser. Eco's division inadequate – world of the thriller is not divided into two categories but three...

Drafting proposals

One of the things students find hard about a long essay, or dissertation, is deciding what to write about. One of the main reasons for insisting that students hand in a draft proposal at the same time as their reading dossier, is to make explicit the fact that they already have a resource to draw from when deciding and planning their own extended essay title.

Because we wanted to foster the value of collaborative learning for any independently completed assessment task, we also decided to allocate seminar time for the drafting of the proposal for study. This meant that everyone was familiar with the criteria for the extended essay, aware of how other students interpreted and fulfilled these criteria and could try ideas out on their peers.

Exercise 1

Preparation: For the next session try to come up with some questions you might like to do, or areas you would like to write about. In effect, come in with some proposals. Use the form to help you evaluate the usefulness of your reading dossier and to start sketching out a proposal.

Additional Notes: At the same time as you submit the dossier you need to submit a draft proposal for the extended essay. I suggest that you begin by giving a statement of intent, that is the central idea or the question (I am going to look at...). Then identify the primary materials to be used, that is, what texts (Mills & Boon or Bond, film, book or both). Then identify appropriate theoretical or methodological approaches. Finally, give an indication of the overall structure of your essay. When you make a list of the primary and secondary texts you will be using you MUST use the standard reference and bibliographic practice as illustrated in the student guide.

Exercise 2

Read the two sample draft proposals. They are based on work proposed by students last year. As you read them ask yourself if they communicate:

- a manageable statement of intent, which contains a question
- identification of primary materials to be used
- identification of appropriate theoretical or methodological approaches
- indication of overall dissertation structure
- skeleton bibliography, which is set out using the guidelines in the student handbook.

Exercise 3

If you are finding it difficult to generate a topic for the extended essay, start by considering the texts you have enjoyed reading. Then have a look at your reading dossier, to remind you of the themes and issues which were discussed in the seminar on that text and the secondary material you read. Then complete the following statement:

In my extended essay I would like to explore the relationships between _____ (title or text) and _____ (title of text). These two texts seem to be related in the following ways: _____ I think these connections are important because _____ (Meyer: 1993)

Each student should then present their central theme to another person – who should write down the idea as they hear it and suggest at least one text/secondary source that they have read and think is appropriate.

The session has three distinct but related activities. First, the students practice using an evaluation form to identify the features of their reading dossiers which may help them to highlight appropriate topics for study and a draft proposal. Secondly, they follow this independent activity with a group evaluation of a draft proposal using the form. This gives them a sense of what makes a productive proposal. Thirdly, they are asked to go back to their reading dossiers and draft proposals and to think through how they might be improved.

One of the reasons for suggesting that students compare and contrast texts, is that we have found that the best assessed work uses comparison and contrast to demonstrate understanding of who controls knowledge, and how practices and discourses give content meaning and value. Encouraging students who are unsure of topics to practise comparisons and contrasts, helps them to improve both the structure of their work and to identify issues worth following through.

Reproduced below is one of the sample draft proposals we handed out to students. The sample was fictional – created by us from various student drafts over the last couple of years.

Bond is not and never can be a millennium man.

The last two Bond films have attempted to make 007 a hero for the millennium. They offer less stereotypical roles for women, less racial stereotyping – they suggest that Bond can be a suitable hero for the millennium. However, it seems to me that a leopard never changes its spots. Fleming's works are rooted in the ideology of colonialism and patriarchal ascendancy. Whilst modern day scriptwriters have moved away from these dominant ideologies, the themes are essentially the same. Consequently, current Bond movies can be read as an example of our nostalgia for the way things were, rather than a radical break with tradition. Whilst the film scriptwriters soften the unpleasantness of Fleming's texts, they still create a white, male hero of global capitalism who patronizes anyone who is different.

I will argue my case by comparing and contrasting the representation of Bond in the movies and the novels. By looking at the functions performed by both Bonds – what is expected of them, what fears and anxieties are generated, what active roles they play in the thriller narrative of film and text and what values they seem to embody – it is hoped that a common ideological agenda can be elicited. The book I will use to illuminate this agenda will be *Bond and Beyond*.

(198 words)

Contents

Introduction (will be the draft proposal – see above)

Chapter 1: Background to Bond: Fleming's Life

Chapter 2: Summary of argument in *Bond and Beyond: the political career of a popular hero* (Bennett & Woolacott: 1987).

Chapter 3: Fleming's Bond

Chapter 4: Bond on screen

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Bibliography

Bennett, T. & Woolacott, J. (1987) *Bond and Beyond: the political career of a popular hero*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Education.

Dr No by Ian Fleming

Dr No on screen

Goldfinger by Ian Fleming

Goldfinger on screen

Impact on students

Preparatory reading group

Whilst our students initially found the reading a challenge (and a struggle) they also recognized its worth:

'It is important to be able to analyse whether something is achieving what it sets out to do, and to analyse what it is actually doing, how the reader may have been manipulated by the text, and how the text has responded to society and culture. It's a dialogic situation isn't it? From text to reader and reader to text. That's the same for literature: I mean how often do we have lectures that explain what Chaucer was saying to his society at that time?'

It has to be said that not all the students were happy about extending the scope of study to a broader notion of culture including visual readings.

'I understood that Popular Fiction was mainly literature, but there's been large chunks of TV and film, which, had I known about it, would have put me off, because I can't be bothered with that. "Popular Culture" would have been a better title.'

'We often watch films on this course, but they're never as good [as book].'

'It was strange sitting with your pen and paper watching a programme – just because it's not the norm is it? But I think it makes you get into it, really. Because I'm going to be doing how women are depicted in science fiction, so you kind of look at how they are, and you realize that in science fiction there's not much of a role for women. It does make you focus.'

Reading dossiers

Students used the reading dossiers to practise writing down difficult ideas in their own words.

'I try to write my opinions down before I read anyone else's because it gets so confusing. I know last year I got to the point where I couldn't remember what my opinion was! So now I write it down so I can see, "oh yes I thought this". It might change, but if you get to the point that you do completely forget, or you get to the point that you've got no opinion whatsoever, then you can go back and remind yourself.'

Even more encouraging was their willingness to extract theories and methods of analysis from the set reading and apply them to their own selection of material culture:

'We had to collect some adverts and read this article and relate it to them. But the thing that jumped into my mind were these photographs, so I searched the Internet, got the photographs, and did myself a little justification for why I believe these photographs fulfilled these criteria. Doing that made this very dry, difficult bit of theory useable, workable, it got so I could deal with it... The last one we did [took notes from an article] I've got my little note form here: I didn't relate it to adverts, I related it to propaganda photographs and I did a little handout, which was just to myself, which justified how this theory could be used for this and not just for adverts. That helped me to get my head round the issues that were being raised. I stick them into the dossier...'

Interviews with students suggested that they saw the difficulty and variety of the set critical reading increase as the course progressed and felt equipped to deal with this:

'In a way there's a progression because you use the tools as you go along and it gets easier. I mean, could you imagine trying to use the stuff on science fiction right at the beginning? It was hard enough doing that when we did...'

'Some of the things I wrote early on are not as good as I would do now, but I would leave them in because they give an indication that you have progressed. It's silly to change it and make it look as if you haven't changed at all, but saying we've progressed, I don't know how sophisticated it is!'

'You do question, now, see more in texts. You read everything as opposed to just accepting anything about it.'

'I found the course quite difficult, especially last year, when we were doing about a book a week, but it does give you a broad base to work from, in retrospect I think it was worth doing it that way. I think so, yes.'

Drafting proposals

Students appeared confident about the task in hand and had clearly benefited from the opportunity to view and evaluate other draft proposals

'I feel more confident about doing my proposal now I've seen those proposals, to see how someone else has done it.'

'I think it's hard work. We normally get a nice list of questions saying choose one. Don't think for yourselves. We've done it for you!'

'I found it hard to choose my own title. It's been easy in the past, because they've set the essay titles. But it's taken quite a bit to get it worded, and even the title, since the proposal – I've had to mess with it. So it was good, because it was hard, because it's not what we're used to.'

Several also seemed to make use of the compare and contrast model we introduced to them:

'[I want to compare and contrast film and text in my extended essay] because of an essay I'd read, and the lady [critic] had looked at the message the text was giving, how it had been manipulated and changed in the film, because society had moved on and changed, so it was aimed at a different audience, written by a different part of society. It was really interesting.'

'I'm comparing two films and two novels; I'm not cross-comparing [looking at adaptations]. I'm doing detective films and books. I think if you compare the likes of "Miss Marple" with detective series today, you get interesting things.'

Later, when they had written and submitted their proposals along with their evaluation form, they found the subsequent tutor feedback useful:

'[The feedback on the proposal] helped me with the structure, because I was going to do two texts, and she helped me to see how I could do them together, rather than keeping them separate. So I'm changing the structure and it's loads better!'

'It's done the same for me, actually, rather than talking about one text here and the other one there, I'm now going to concentrate on a comparison of the two, and I'm discussing them together.'

'It was useful because I was worried I'd made a complete mess of it, but you found out that actually you did know what you were doing and it set you off thinking, "oh, I can do this after all, I'm not on the wrong lines."'

Impact on staff

The reading dossier and associated strategies were piloted by two members of staff. One had a background in Film and Cultural Studies, the other in Literature with an interest in Cultural Studies. Although both made changes to the reading they asked students to do, it proved easy to alter the emphasis of the set reading to reflect the different approaches. The first time we ran the course the focus was on audience reception, the second time on genre.

Although they're not marked, continuation to the second semester is conditional on handing in the draft proposal and reading dossier. This year the problem of students selecting which seminars to attend recurred. Other students felt that their development was hampered by this absenteeism. A possible solution would be to agree ground rules for the conduct of seminars in week one. The students who did attend wanted severe penalties for those who did not and wanted to see the reading dossiers given a mark rather than being pass/fail. They wanted this primarily to improve seminar attendance. Those that came to all the sessions recognized the benefits. They liked the idea of keeping a steady record and also saw the dossier as an alternative to an assessed seminar. If tutors were to take up these students' recommendations that the dossiers should be marked, the following guidelines might be followed. Regularity of entries, length of entries and appropriateness are three useful guidelines for evaluating dossiers in small classes and monitoring attendance at those classes. The dossier should show a continuous involvement with the course material through the semester. There should be no holes, nor any obvious and extended lapses of interest. These broad holistic evaluation criteria can then be matched to broad grade ranges. (Fulwiler: 1997)

Our students used their dossiers to improve their academic writing. They used them to record, summarize and note down ideas and concepts which had been raised in seminars. They also used them to include written summaries of the articles they had read. An alternative approach would be to encourage the students to link their personal experiences and their reading by making journal entries. Although this option was outlined in the student handbook, it clearly needed more vigorous flagging-up for the students to feel confident about practising the approach. (Fulwiler: 1997)

Our experience suggests that the practice of writing up discussion and research notes in the dossier does help students to integrate knowledge and methodologies from several subject sources. The draft proposal we include at the end of this section illustrates this well. Here we have a student selecting and describing difficult concepts which they have encountered on the course and making them their own.

One of the disadvantages of using reading dossiers formatively is that they are labour intensive. Ways to make this less so would be to ask students to prepare a mini-dossier of materials from the course which relate solely to the draft proposal. However, we think the gain in student confidence is ample reward for the extra time spent reading and marking the dossiers.

Sample draft proposal

— great title

Title

'The El Monte P.D. had Dead White Woman Fever'

Masculinity and Misogyny in Modern American Crime Writing.

It is my intention to discuss examples of masculinity and misogyny in contemporary American crime writing.

My essay will feature substantially, two works by the writer James Ellroy. I have selected L.A. Confidential (1990) and My Dark Places (1996) as primary sources. I have chosen these sources as they are both hugely successful bestsellers; but also because they both contain evidence of the above social ills, whilst demonstrating the potential of the genre to be morally and socially challenging.

The first section of the essay will focus on L.A. Confidential. The work features 'noir' and intricate plotting common to the crime genre. I will argue that the text also uncovers wider debate on masculinity in crime fiction and 'gendered' crime.

The second section will feature another Ellroy work 'My Dark Places', a memoir of the unsolved murder of the writer's mother. Ellroy, has himself, defended this work as, 'explicitly explored threads of misogyny in America today. I shall elaborate on this and incorporate feminist criticism of crime writing.

Throughout the essay, I aim to assert Ellroy's works as illuminating, provocative and unique in their genre. Therefore I shall also include (less detailed) discussion of several other contemporary texts, which I will argue to be less responsible in their demonstration of masculinity and misogyny.

Primary Sources

Ellroy, J. L.A. Confidential Amw 1990
Ellroy, J. My Dark Places Amw 1996
Ellroy, J. Clandestine Amw 1980
Ellroy, J. The Black Dahlia Amw 1989

Secondary Sources

Bennett, T Popular Fiction
Cawelti, J.G. Adventure, Mystery and Romance Chicago
University Press 1976

Messant, P. (Ed) Criminal Proceedings - The Contemporary American
Crime Novel Pluto London 1998
in which Cohen, J 'James Ellroy, L.A. and the spectacular
crisis of masculinity' (1998)

Muncie, J & McLaughlin (Eds) The Problem of Crime
Sage London 1996

Munt, S.R. Murder By the Book. Feminism and the Crime
Novel Routledge London/N.Y. 1992

Priestman, M Crime Fiction From Poe to the Present
Northcote House (1998)

Other texts to be discussed:

Vachss, A Shella (PAN 1997)
Cornwell, P Body of Evidence (Warner)
various 'true crime' texts

Evaluation form for final work

Reading dossier/draft proposal evaluation form

The aims of this form are:

- to help your tutor give you feedback and guidance on your proposal for the extended essay
- to help your tutor give you feedback and guidance on the work patterns and research processes evident in your portfolio
- to give you an opportunity to list any aspects of your work to date, or future plans that you would particularly like to have your tutor's opinion on, at your first tutorial meeting.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Proposed Title of Extended Essay _____

1. Essay proposal

The tutor reading your proposal is looking to see that it includes the following things. Check that your draft statement includes:

- A manageable statement of intent, which contains a question. YES/NO
- Identification of primary materials to be used. YES/NO
- Identification of appropriate theoretical or methodological approaches. YES/NO
- An indication of overall dissertation structure. YES/NO
- A skeleton bibliography, which is set out using the guidelines in the student handbook. YES/NO

Tutor's comments

2. Portfolio

The tutor reading your portfolio is looking at the work patterns and research processes you have developed over semester one to see that they include the following things. Does your portfolio demonstrate:

- Your ability to take notes from articles, books and reference sources. YES/NO
- Your ability to organize seminar and research notes and ideas in a meaningful order. YES/NO

Tutor's comments

3. List below any aspects of your work to date that you would particularly like your tutor's opinions on.

4. List the action points agreed between you and your tutor (first tutorial meeting).

Date met with tutor _____

Signed _____

Signed _____

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