Case studies

Enhancing interactive learning in the classroom with Turning Point

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Summary

One of the difficulties involved in engaging students in class discussion is that they feel reticent or not confident enough to openly express their personal views, especially in a module focused on prescriptive vs. descriptive attitudes to language. This case-study describes the use of an innovative resource which helps foster and enhance interactive teaching and learning by means of an electronic response system with voting pads, namely Turning Point.

Background / Context

This case-study is based on my experience in the module *Attitudes to Language*, a second-year course offered to students of English Language and/or Linguistics at the University of Manchester. The aim of the course is to show how attitudes to (English) language have changed since the Renaissance period (the inkhorn controversy) up to the present day (the place of 'grammar' in the National Curriculum), and to show the impact of the changing attitudes on actual language usage, especially around the debate of standard vs. non-standard English, descriptive vs. prescriptive approaches. The thematic focus is on 18th-century prescriptivism. By the end of the semester, through lecture and seminar discussion, students will have developed intellectual skills to critically evaluate people's attitudes to language and to hold debates maintaining arguments and counter-arguments. This being a course on *attitudes*, the challenge, inevitably, is how to engage students in the discussion so that they express *their own attitudes* and how to do so in an interactive way. This challenge is even greater when one teaches large-size groups. (The intake in this module adds up to 130-140 students). The first year I taught this course (2007-08) I used the traditional hands-up method but it does not always do the trick: some students will not participate, some may fail to observe their peers' views, and overall peer-discussion may easily become limited to a few keen students.(1) With a view to enhancing the teaching and learning experience, I resorted to Turning Point (TP).(2)

TP helps to overcome these difficulties by capturing group discussion effectively in an (inter)active and engaging environment. In a nutshell, it is an electronic response system which enables students to respond to quiz questions using voting pads. Designed as a simple add-in to PowerPoint, the software allows conversion of slides previously created in PowerPoint. Students simply click the relevant numbered/lettered button on their voting pad and the signal is sent to the receiver attached to the computer (like a pen-drive). The responses are automatically collected and the results are displayed immediately on screen, for example a bar-graph displaying the distribution of Yes/No answers. To put it simply, it is like the audience wildcard in *Who wants to be a millionaire?*.

Activities / Practice

The topic of the activity was *Grammar Myths* – '*Three hundred years of prescriptivism, and counting*' (Beal 2009). In previous lectures (this was week 11 of 12) we had discussed the roots of

18th- and 19th-century prescriptive rules and their impact on contemporary attitudes and usage, focusing on linguistic features that became stigmatised, such as double negation, end-placed prepositions or h-dropping. The aim now is to trace their legacy in the present day, late 20th and early 21st century, hence the reference to 'myths'.

Aitchinson, for instance, claims in the first edition of *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* that linguistics today is "descriptive, not prescriptive" (1981:12-13). However, in the second edition she adds that "we in the late 20th century are the direct *descendants* of the 18th-century puristic passion", that "statements very like those of Bishop Lowth [1762] are *still* found in books and newspapers, […] *still* being drummed into the heads of the younger generations by some parents and schoolteachers who misguidedly think they are handing over the essential prerequisites for speaking and writing good English" (1991:12; italics added). This has been demonstrated by Joan Beal's recent research on a 'new prescriptivism' apparent in an increasing number of usage handbooks and advertisements (2008, 2009). In order to engage students in the topic, I decided to carry out a survey on *their* attitudes to language usage. TP serves a double function: it motivates students to take part in the survey without the fear of feeling embarrassed for expressing their views overtly, and it offers a means of better absorbing a number of 18th-century grammar myths drawing on reflection and personal experience rather than on the drilling method, in which they are expected to absorb slide after slide passively. Students often said that they were aware that you can say X or Y depending on context (e.g. formal/informal), but they hardly ever reflect on *why*. The (inter)active tasks of this activity helped develop their ability to approach the study of language from a critical perspective in its social and historical context: the why and wherefores of *their* language usage.

The survey was inspired by Mittins et al.'s (1970) *Attitudes to English Usage* survey carried out by members of the Institute of Education English Research Group at the University of Newcastle. Their aim was to investigate current attitudes to usage at a time when English grammar was (in)famously absent from the curriculum. Mirroring their subtitle *An Enquiry by the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne*, I introduced the survey to my students as '*Nuria et al. 2009 – An Enquiry by the University of Manchester*' (the *et al.* being my students in this module), as a way of integrating them further in the activity.
The goals are:

- To assess acceptability (not usage) of disputed usages in grammar in terms of formal vs. informal register, written vs. spoken medium;
- To analyse real-time change by setting the grammar myths in context in relation to the 18th-century rules discussed in previous lectures/seminars;
- To trace apparent-time change from 1970 to 2009, before and after the National Curriculum. (I tend to emphasise this last point, as it adds value to the students' contribution.)

The activity involves:

- A live survey with TP in the lecture, consisting of a sample of disputed usages which students have to judge as acceptable/unacceptable. The lecture is thus (inter)active and thought-provoking, and provides the ground-work for the seminar task.
- A written take-home survey of the students' own attitudes and two interviewees' attitudes. Students are asked to jot down some comments on why they (don't) accept each usage, and are also expected to trace the origin of any two grammar myths. (The total number of disputed usages is reduced from 50 to 25.)
- The follow-up seminar/tutorial is devoted to critical and analytical discussion of the students' survey results: their attitudes, their

interviewees', Mittins et al.'s (1970) and, ultimately, 18th-century grammar rules.

- A brief summary of the lecture and seminar findings is presented in the lecture after the seminars have taken place; this validates student work and provides a global conclusion to the three-fold activity.

What follows is an account of the lecture survey with TP.

Turning Point in Action

After one or two ice-breaking slides,(3) the survey starts. I will explain the procedure in relation to the disputed usage of *less/fewer*, taking as an illustrative example a real situation: the controversy that arose in the summer of 2008 when the checkout counters of Tesco supermarkets read '*8 items or less*'. Figure 1 displays a couple of screenshots from the lecture.
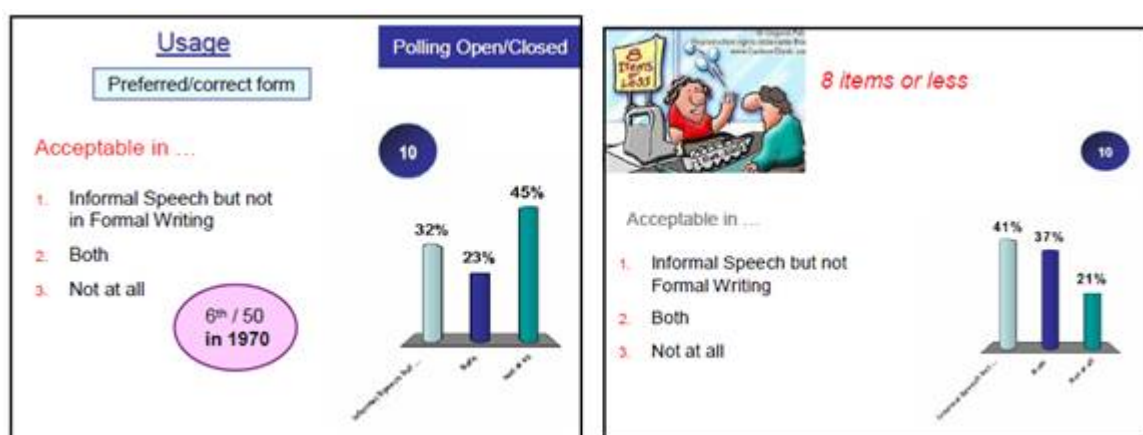

Figure 1. Explaining Turning Point with the disputed usage of less vs fewer.

1. The title box in the slide shows the disputed usage X in red (e.g. *8 items or less*).
2. Students are asked to reflect on how 'acceptable' usage X is.
3. Three options are given: X is acceptable in (1) informal speech but not formal writing; (2) both informal speech and formal writing; (3) is not acceptable at all.
4. When the poll opens, indicated at the top right, students click on the key of the voting pad accordingly. The clock starts counting down, after which time votes will no longer be received. The clock and the number of seconds are optional and manually adjusted.
5. When the poll is closed, the group responses are displayed in a graph/table, tailored to the lecturer's preferences. Now the lecturer has to react on the spot and interpret the answers. For instance, the majority of my students (41%) were aware of stylistic differences between informal speech and formal writing, and a 21% would not accept it at all; presumably this is because they were taught the rule in school. At the same time, a rather high percentage (37%) found nothing wrong with the use of *less*, which can derive either from their permissive attitude to prescriptive rules or, most likely, from their lack of awareness of such rule.
6. The feedback provided for each linguistic feature is two-fold: real-time change and apparent-time change. Firstly, I show the preferred/correct usage in a (blue) box under the (red) incorrect usage and I explain the contention by tracing the prescriptive rule to its roots in the 18th/19th century, i.e. the 'grammar myth'. In doing so I recall topics discussed in

previous lectures, thus serving the purpose of revision too. For instance, the rule states that *fewer* must be used with countable nouns whereas *less* is used with non-countable nouns. Since *items* is countable, the use of *less* is incorrect. I emphasise here the prescriptive principle against variation: of two forms only one can be correct. I then link past and present-day attitudes and conclude whether and to what extent there has been a real-time change. In this case there is change in that acceptability in both contexts is as high as 37%, yet the legacy of the rule is still apparent in the 41% of option 1 and the 21% of absolute reluctance.

7. The next step is to evaluate apparent-time change. In a pink bubble I show the rate of acceptability amongst Mittins et al.'s 50 features, the 50th position being the least acceptable. In 1970 the acceptability of *less* occupied the 30th position; therefore, there has not been much of a change in the last 40 years as far as my students are concerned. I take the opportunity here to encourage them to find out about their parents/grandparents so that they feel more engaged with the activity.

8. In addition to the critical evaluation of the data, I often add another bubble with explicit attitudinal comments on the disputed usage. For instance, Crystal quotes a letter of complaint written in the 1980s saying "It makes my blood boil – to read/hear LESS when it should be FEWER" (1995:188; capitals in original). See Figure 3 with regard to the unacceptable use of *I* in *between you and I*.

Figure 2 shows TP in action: a student using the voting pad (left) and the results for the disputed usage of the preposition *to* in *different to* instead of *from* (right). This has been chosen as an example of real and apparent-time change in attitudes, while Figure 3 offers an example of no change, i.e. legacy from the 18th century.
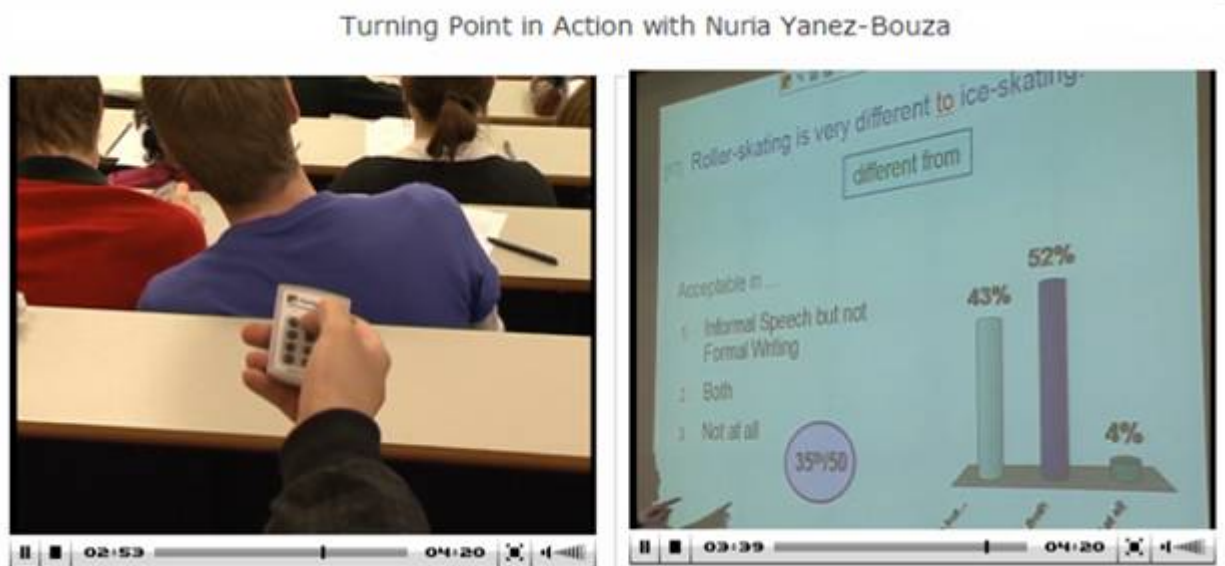

Figure 2. Turning Point in action

Figure 3. Enhancing feedback with Turning Point

The live survey consisted of seven or eight slides/usages only, approximately 15-20 minutes, otherwise it loses appeal (less is more!). Other linguistic features discussed include the use of the subjunctive (*if it was/were offered*), split infinitives (*to successfully complete a degree*), the combination *try and* instead of *try to* (*try and/to arrive on time*) and the lack of concord with *data* (*data is/are*). The use of real examples such as the *less/fewer* instance from Tesco or bad grammar in song lyrics (e.g. Figure 3) will prompt reflection on/critical analysis of language the next time they find themselves in the same situation, e.g. in the supermarket or listening to music.

When the lecture is finished, you can save the session with the students' responses (a pop-up window will remind you of it) in order to generate graphical and/or numerical reports, which can be then made available to students on any VLE platform. These reports, tailored to the lecturer's purposes, are automatically exported to an Excel spreadsheet with a high level of detailed information (see some examples in Figure 4).

TP thus enabled me to capture the group discussion very effectively and to provide students with their responses beyond the lecture environment. Besides, it can be used in subsequent years. This gives added value to the exercise: students feel they have a say and are quite pleased that their responses will serve as a reference point for the coming students.
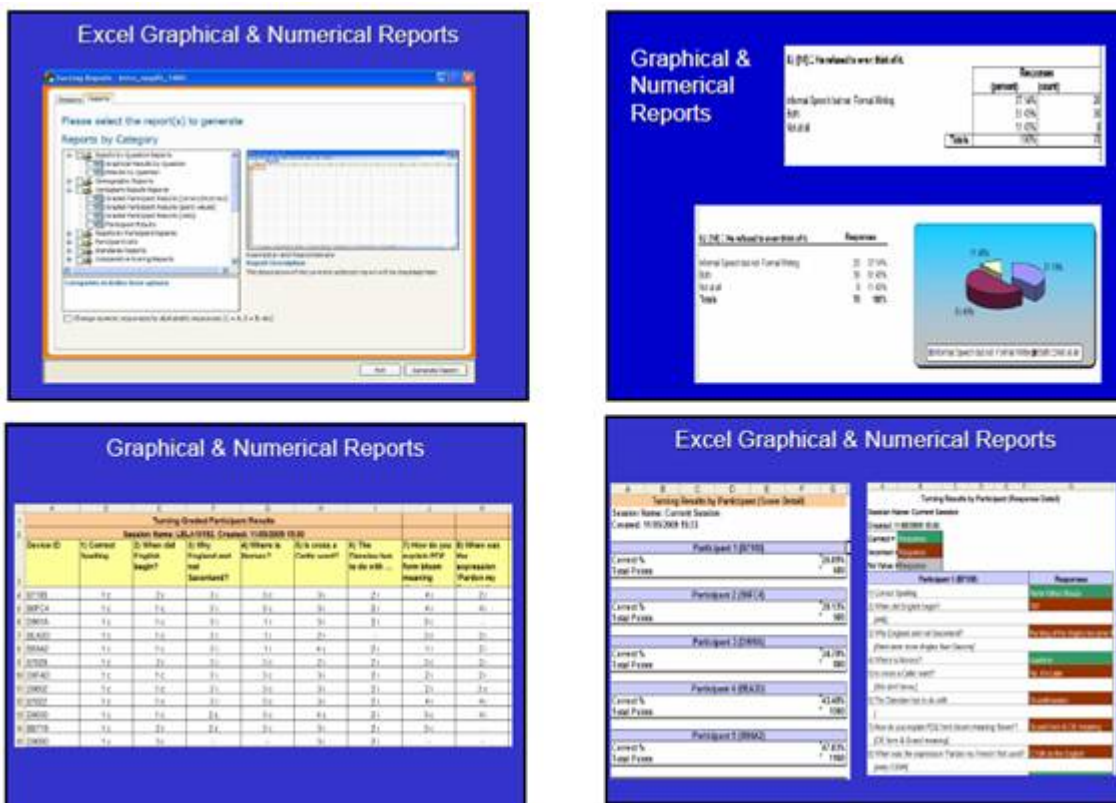
Figure 4. Graphical and numerical reports generated by Turning Point

Conclusions

The activity described above, involving both lecture and seminar tasks, integrates descriptive, analytical, evaluative and critical skills in terms of attitudes to language usage, past and present. Carrying out the survey further provides students with basic transferable skills useful in sociolinguistic research, which they can put into practice in other modules. It is also a good illustrative example of how to integrate research with teaching in a mutually illuminating way: on the one hand, my research expertise in the topic of 18th-century grammatical tradition laid the foundations for the design of the lecture contents and the usage survey; on the other, the independent research which students carry out for the seminar (the survey) provided me with real data and fruitful insights for my ongoing work.

This case-study has shown the value of Turning Point as an effective tool to foster and enhance class participation and discussion as well as to improve the quality of feedback provision in the face-to-face learning environment. TP enabled me to engage students to express their own attitudes towards specific linguistic features and to reflect on the disputed nature of language usage in general, rather than simply regurgitating 18th-century rules slide after slide (from 'passive' to 'active' teaching and learning). Instant feedback in graphs/tables, complemented with the lecturer's explanations, helps students achieve a deeper conceptual understanding of the topic. Furthermore, the experience feeds back to the lecturer as it enables us to asses the students' level of knowledge/understanding. (When I asked my students what was controversial about the example '*8 items or less*', a large number of them admitted they did not know.) TP has the added value of giving students the opportunity to become aware of their peers' attitudes, which triggers peer-discussion inside and outside the classroom. And all this is achieved in an interactive, stimulating way.

Other benefits and uses are summarised below:

- **Flexibility**: one or two slides can be included (a) at the beginning of a lecture to check whether students have done the required preparation, (b) any time during the lecture to

check understanding of key concepts, or (c) at the end of the lecture/unit/semester, for revision purposes.

- **Students' self-assessment**: quizzes facilitate awareness of their own knowledge of a topic and retention of course materials.
- Team competitions, as in the Linguistics Olympiad or the 'University Challenge' contest, are also facilitated, thereby helping improve **team-work** skills.
- Voting is by default **anonymous**, which increases/triggers participation successfully. Alternatively, it can be set up in advance to link student IDs to particular handsets, thereby enabling **automatic assessment**. For instance, using the layout of multiple choice questions one can set correct and incorrect answers, with the possibility of having more than one correct answer and of assigning different values to different answers/questions. Individual and group marks and statistics are automatically generated. (Figure 5 displays a couple of screenshots from a quiz in one of my other modules.)
- A **time-saver**: both in terms of exam marking and survey collection data. It has the added value of providing more accurate and scrutinised results.
- A **user-friendly** tool that requires low level of technical expertise. All students need to do is to press a key in the voting pad, even without pointing at the screen, and they can change their mind while polling is still open. For the lecturer, TP presents itself as a simple add-in to Power Point. Slides and reports can be reused in subsequent years, are easily saveable and ready for display onto any VLE platform.

The only drawback I can see is that the actual lecture time is reduced because of the distribution and collection of the voting pads. Nonetheless, once students are familiarised with it it should not take up more than five minutes. Admittedly, it does require some extra time to master the software when using it for the first time but this is no more the case than with any other software such as Turnitin or PowerPoint itself.
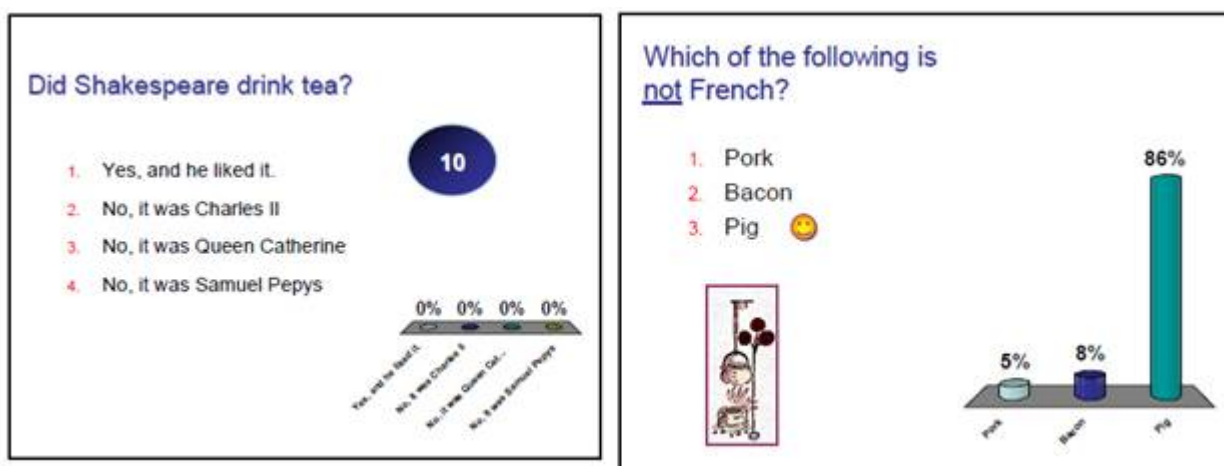

Figure 5. Turning Point in Action: Assessed quiz session

The positive reaction of my students and the favourable reports by the eLearning officers who attended the session encouraged the Faculty of Humanities teaching and learning team to purchase its own set of voting pads. As the pioneer staff member in the School, I was invited to run a demonstration of TP in the school away day for innovation in teaching and learning (November 2009), after which a number of colleagues expressed their interest in adopting this method in their lectures/seminars. The use of TP for this particular topic also had an impact on my students' research interests: one of the students in this module is currently working on a large-scale survey of attitudes to usage for her BA dissertation.

All in all, TP helps to overcome the bridge between group discussion and individual learning, face-to-face and eLearning provision, lecture delivery and feedback provision, while achieving a deep(er) engagement of students with the topic, a better conceptual understanding and, overall, a more satisfactory teaching and learning experience.

Footnotes

1. Observation by Anna Verges, eLearning officer.
2. My greatest gratitude to the Faculty of Humanities eLearning team, especially to Anna Verges.
3. It is good practice to include one or two ice-breaking slides to motivate students, especially the first time TP is introduced to them. For this lecture, I had two: *'Do you care about language?'*, with the basic options Yes/No, and *'How much do you care about language?'*, where five options were given (slobs, yobs, snobs, pedants, doubters). The advantages of TP are readily confirmed: the category 'pedants' was voted by 29% of my students; I doubt (many of) these would have classified themselves in this way using the hands-up method.

References

Texts used on the course

Aitchinson, Jean. 1981. *Language change: Progress or decay?* London: Fontana Paperbacks. (2nd edition, 1991, and 3rd edition, 2001, with CUP).

Bad Grammar in Song Lyrics: http://www.amiright.com/names/bad-grammar/

Beal, Joan C. 2008. 'Shamed by your English?': The market value of a 'good' pronunciation. In Joan C. Beal, Camela Nocera & Massimo Sturiale (eds.), *Perspectives on Prescriptivism*, 21-40. Bern: Peter Lang.

Beal, Joan C. 2009. Three Hundred Years of Prescriptivism (and counting…). In Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade & Wim van der Wurff (eds.), *Current Issues in Late Modern English*, 33-55. Bern: Peter Lang.

Crystal, David. 1995. *The Cambridge encyclopaedia of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Mittins, William H., Mary Salu, Mary Edminson & Sheila Coyne. 1970. *Attitudes to English usage. An enquiry by the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne*. Institute of Education English Research Group. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Using Turning Point

- Software downloadable from http://www.turningtechnologies.com/responsesystemsupport/downloads/ [version 4.2.1]
- Turning Point website with tutorials and case studies: http://www.turningtechnologies.com/studentresponsesystems/ http://www.turningtechnologies.com/responsesystemsupport/producttraining/onlinetutorials/ http://www.turningtechnologies.com/highereducationinteractivelearning/casestudies.cfm
- *Introduction to Turning Point Software, v 2.0*. MHS eLearning team. 2009.
- *Blended Learning Examples: Student discussion in class through response pads*. Faculty of Humanities Teaching & Learning Office, The University of Manchester.
- *Turning Point in Action with Nuria Yáñez-Bouza*. Video Library, Faculty of Humanities Teaching & Learning Office, The University of Manchester. (Access restricted to staff and students of the University of Manchester only):

http://stream.manchester.ac.uk/Play.aspx?VideoId=2695