Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning

Resources

Title: Problems: Defining Learning Outcomes
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Summary:

The desired learning outcomes of an Enquiry-Based Learning course will be realised through the individual enquiry tasks.

As an aid to this process, this paper analyses the potential learning outcomes of one of the problems presented in the CEEBL Resource Pack 001: problem 7 ('Publishing a Booklet') from the course in Eighteenth-Century Poetry.

This problem is the example referred to in an article on Bill Hutchings's courses in *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*, volume 15, number 2 (February 2006), pp. 6-8 (http://www.ntlf.com).

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Introduction

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As an aid to this process, this paper analyses the potential learning outcomes of one of the problems presented in the *CEEBL Resource Pack 001: Problem 7 ('Publishing a Booklet')* from the course in Eighteenth-Century Poetry.

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It should be noted that not all the potential learning outcomes of this problem are essential for a successful response to it. Enquiry-Based Learning problems at this level in a discursive, open discipline such as Literary Studies inevitably have a diverse, and equally valid series of possible outcomes. Indeed, this is one of the strengths of Enquiry-Based Learning at this level: it releases the creative potential of the students in a non-directive manner. However, some of the learning outcomes are essential. For example, the language within which the specimen booklet is couched must be considered. Any written presentation, particularly in an English context, must have expression as a core assessment criterion, and so the students' estimation of the appropriate level of language for the task must be taken into account. Each course-designer will have to decide on the nature and status of the learning outcomes, as appropriate to the discipline and the level of students.

This process is assisted if, when devising problems, one works backwards from the intended learning outcomes to the scenarios that will link into them.

Learning Outcomes: example

Problem 7: Publishing a booklet
Assessment outcome: written

ADVERTISEMENT

The English Tourist Board is initiating a campaign to attract people back into the countryside after the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. As part of this campaign, it is sponsoring an exhibition documenting and demonstrating the responses of writers and visitors to the English countryside through the ages. The exhibition is to be called,

"The eye of the beholder: landscape description, 1700-2000"

The English Tourist Board is also sponsoring a booklet (18000 words) to accompany the exhibition. This booklet will complement the exhibition by providing representative examples of landscape description in poetry from the three centuries, together with explanatory commentary and notes. The booklet will be aimed at a wide public, but is intended to be scholarly and informed.

The English Tourist Board invites teams to apply for a contract to compile the booklet. Applicants should submit a rationale for the selection of passages from the eighteenth century and a specimen example / specimen examples (also from the eighteenth century) with commentary and notes.

[Note: the word-length will vary depending on the number of people in the group]

1. Issues: language, presentation, expression

The problem is set in a 'real-life' context. It is, that is to say, a recognisably feasible scenario that introduces students to some of the issues of practical writing for specific publication purposes.

Thus students need to demonstrate their understanding that writing takes place within contexts, not in abstract space; and that those contexts go beyond that of the conventional discourse of academic essay and academic assessment.

The task is designed to enable students to demonstrate their grasp of different kinds or registers of language. It encourages an awareness of the range of language and styles and of their relationship to a target audience.

The task is set within a practical, professional context. This problem has a strong relevance for the transferable skills that enhance employability. Employers' requests for references frequently ask for evidence of students having taken part in activities that generate employability skills. In addition to basic skills of written expression, the task requires students to demonstrate a keen sense of how to present a submission to a public body in a professional manner.

A key presentational issue is that of how one relates academic respectability (note the phrase, "scholarly and informed", in the scenario) to a wider readership. Are these at variance or can they be reconciled? A useful analogy may be the art exhibition catalogue. Such catalogues are bought by members of the general public, but at the same time frequently represent major works of scholarship, and so have a significant role to play within the academic community.

This task also raises the issue of historical relativity. What levels or kinds of commentary are appropriate for bringing eighteenth-century poetry to a twenty-first century readership? This is a question relevant to any edition. It is also, surely, a key question for our pedagogy: what relevance does the past have for the present? As G. K. Chesterton memorably wrote, "To be merely modern is to condemn oneself to an ultimate narrowness" ("On Reading"). Do notes need to explain who authors were? Do they need to provide

information about different verse-forms? Do places and their eighteenth-century significance need to be explained? For example, would the importance of Tintern Abbey in the development of the cult of the picturesque in visual and written art need to be described? If so, how much detail would it be necessary to go into?

2. Issues: information retrieval, research

The course when it was conventionally taught used an anthology (*Eighteenth-Century Poetry: an annotated anthology*, eds. David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) as its basic reading text. This selection remains the most useful and accessible initial reference-point for students. However, there are grave problems in over-reliance on what is inevitably a limited selection, itself a passive acceptance of authority contrary to the spirit of active learning. Students should recognise that all selections are reflective of the selectors. They can do this by acknowledging that there are many other possible examples of landscape description in the period than those contained within the anthology. Moreover, having to make a selection themselves and so having to decide on the criteria on which the selection will be based should make the process a reflective one.

Specific questions include: how will students locate examples? Will they work by division of labour? Will they recognise the differences between poor internet materials and excellent on-line resources such as Eighteenth-Century Collections on Line (ECCO)? How will they control the potentially huge response? Back in 1966, R A Aubin's *Topographical Poetry in Eighteenth-Century England* contained a massive bibliography, which modern data bases considerably expand upon. How will they monitor the material for quality and relevance?

3. Issues: cultural assumptions

Poetry, and indeed prose writing, about landscape is commonly associated with 'Romantic' and Victorian – rather than 'Augustan' or eighteenth-century perspectives, so students' first response may be to imagine that a section of the proposed booklet dealing with the nineteenth century would be stronger and therefore easier to compile than an eighteenth-century section. The eighteenth century is still characterised by most courses as the period of the novel and of satire, despite the best endeavours of enlightened scholars, such as David Fairer, to rectify this false impression. The nature of the present exercise challenges

students to re-think these assumptions by discovering how much descriptive writing there was in the eighteenth-century. How far would, or should, the booklet itself take up a challenging position with regard to general assumptions?

4. Issues: conceptual

The task provides students with the title of the exhibition: "The eye of the beholder". How far would or should students pick up on the conceptual implications of the implied commonplace, that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder? There are various levels of complexity that are possible here, so that this is a fruitful area for students to demonstrate their capacity for intellectual discrimination and research. The idea that beauty is subjective is commonly associated by literature students with, again, 'Romantic' stereotypes, which emphasise the experience of beauty as being personal and individual. The most obvious manifestation of this is the use of the first-person pronoun in poems. Well-known examples include William Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud". More knowledge of poetry would, however, lead students to recognise that such identification of beauty with the experiences of an individual self is by no means a 'Romantic' invention. Back in the seventeenth century, Andrew Marvell's poem "The Garden" furnishes a positive riot of sensory experience. In the eighteenth century, William Cowper's large-scale poem *The Task* contains significant passages of description that centre on the poet himself observing and walking through landscape. It is significant that Wordsworth's largest attempt to render the full experience of his own experience of nature, *The Prelude*, was strongly influenced by Cowper's poem. Indeed, although *The Prelude* was not published until as late as 1850, the earliest versions of it date from the end of the eighteenth century, a fact of literary history that might prove useful to students working on this scenario. The philosophical roots of radical Romantic subjectivism lie in the eighteenth century, particularly in the writings of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Another tack would lead students to consider whether the conceptual assumptions of the title should be challenged. Can description achieve 'objectivity'? What would objectivity mean in such a context? Conversely, if objectivity is rejected as a possibility, how can a reader relate to a description deriving from someone else's experience? There are issues of aesthetics as well as literary history involved here. Some aspects of these issues were examined in my own essay, "'Can Pure Description Hold the Place of Sense?': Thomson's

Landscape Poetry", in *James Thomson: Essays for the Tercentenary*, ed. Richard Terry (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).

Some students might wish, or be able, to pursue the fundamental analysis of the issue in eighteenth-century aesthetics. Potential areas would include the subjectivity of perception, and so of aesthetics, implied in the radical empiricism of David Hume; eighteenth-century discussions of taste, including David Hume's own essay on the subject, where the idea of consensus is pursued as a way out of aesthetic solipsism; the pursuit of universals through taxonomies of aesthetic experience, notably in conceptions of the sublime and the beautiful (identified in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*), and of the picturesque; the idea of universals in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*.

The level of intellectual engagement we have now reached is high, and assessment would need to examine carefully what levels of engagement constitute reasonable expectations. There is, in addition, the question of what level of conceptual discussion is appropriate for the kind of booklet envisaged in the task.

5. Issues: organisation, team-work

The selection of poems requires agreement and consensus. Team-work thus becomes a vital part of the process.

The selection also requires a structure, upon which the group needs to decide. One group that tackled this problem decided to link the sections through a sequence of rivers, so producing a tour round the country. Other topographical features, such as hills (which were a popular feature of eighteenth-century landscape poems), would serve equally well. Or the structural principle could be an aesthetic issue rather than a landscape feature. In either case, there is potential for the booklet to relate to the vibrant wealth of eighteenth-century topographical drawings and watercolours. The key problem is to balance coherence with the need to demonstrate the range and variety of eighteenth-century descriptive writing.

Finally, students would need to consider the format for the booklet. How does presentation affect the reader's response?