**Writing for Social Purpose – Ideas for Sustainable Teaching and Learning**

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This case study reports on a project funded by Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences (CILASS) at the University of Brighton, where undergraduates were given the opportunity to examine the social responsibility of the writer through a series of workshops and seminars led by local writers, actors, comedians and politicians. Students on this module were expected to produce their own socially conscious creative piece and to reflect on the process. This study reports on the students’ experience of this module and suggests ways in which the module impacts on their development. We argue that HE needs to create learning environments for undergraduates thatcan help students understand how their degrees might influence and help them in their sustainable careers, studies and lives post-university.

**Background**

The responsibility of education in promoting social change has underpinned government responses to the sustainability agenda. Between 1998 and 2003 the UK Government operated a ‘Sustainable Development Education Panel' whose work was developed by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). DEFRA’s sustainability mission statement asserts that the people and government of the United Kingdom

need to make a decisive move toward more sustainable development. Not just because it is the right thing to do, but also because it is in our own long-term best interests. It offers the best hope for the future. Whether at school, in the home or at work, we all have a part to play. Our small everyday actions add up to make a big difference’ (DEFRA, 2009).

At a post-compulsory level, The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) committed the HE sector to environmental causes and a wide project of sustainability awareness across the sector. Organisations such as the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC) and the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) sought to establish networks and collaborative projects with the aim of integrating sustainability broadly across institutions

Although many universities developed sustainability policies as a response to government recommendations, fewer enabled discourses of sustainability to permeate the curricula of the arts and humanities. In the context of wider curriculum developments, interdisciplinarities and innovative approaches within individual disciplines, literature and literary studies remained under-represented and unexplored in debates regarding the incorporation of sustainability into higher education (HE) teaching and learning. Recognizing the educational and social value of literature and literary studies, the authors of the module sought to address this absence.

In April 2009 the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and CILASS issued a call for projects designed to promote the relationship between literature and sustainability. In response to this call, Dr Katy Shaw, Senior Lecturer in English Literature and Jessica Moriarty, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, were awarded funding to author and deliver a second year undergraduate module called ‘Writing and Social Consciousness’ to Humanities students at the University of Brighton between October 2009 and January 2010. The module was written on the basis of a shared belief between the writers that it is necessary to develop a social consciousness in order to operate fully in a democratic society. The authors sought to create a module that would encourage students to see themselves not simply as individuals but as necessarily integrated members of a wider community and system of social relations.

 Underpinning the module design was a belief that the very best literature can provoke, move and motivate and is therefore vital to the ongoing development of the sustainability agenda. In asking questions without definite answers, the module enabled students to ask what they are capable of as readers and writers today. Over the course of the semester, staff and students engaged with each other and with external literary practitioners at an emotional and intellectual level to nurture a supportive and safe environment in which critical thinking and creative response could occur.

The module also aimed to raise student awareness of employability issues through embedded course content and access to professionals and industry experience. In her own study of desirable graduate skills, Sarah Sayce concludes that sustainability literacy is fast becoming a ‘must have’ for all graduates of the future (Sayce, 2009, HEA). During the module, students were made aware of how their experience of engaging with external experts such as novelists and speech writers would contribute to their future employability and that employers are seeking sustainability literate graduates who are sensitive to these contemporary concerns and debates.

**Activities and Practice**

By encouraging an interdisciplinary focus on issues surrounding the sustainability agenda as well helping students develop confidence in writing, research and presentation skills through individual and collaborative work, the module aimed to encourage students to develop a raised awareness and critical understanding of the social world, recognition of themselves as active agents and an appreciation of a corresponding sense of social responsibility. Enabling professional and academic specific specialists, (including actors, writers, politicians and comedians), to work with students from a range of humanities disciplines the module encouraged students to consider such issues as ways in which literature can contribute to and promote sustainable communities, how writers can understand the need for the appropriate and applicable treatment of social issues in literature and how literature can be influenced by the environment and social awareness.

Through contact time students were encouraged to consider how they respond or contribute to social groups and to reflect on their own political agency as a writer and reader. As the module developed, students began to broaden this discussion into wider perspectives on the role of the arts in promoting social consciousness in contemporary society. Sessions necessitated both critical and creative engagement with a range of writings. Involving independent as well as collaborative inquiry based learning, contact time ranged from lectures and seminars, workshops and seminars with guest speakers, writing workshops, group presentation and tutorials. Outside the classroom, students were expected to post their creative work on a blog, situated on-line at the University’s intranet *studentcentral*, to comment on each work and give constructive feedback. This formed the basis of a reflection as part of the assessment. Reading for each week was sourced in a student handbook that was made available online (for environmentally friendly reasons).

In designing the module, the authors sought to develop an established historical partnership at the University of Brighton between literature and the community, as well as to confirm their own existing networks with local writers groups and the local community presses Queenspark Books and Waterloo Press. Queenspark Books are a local community publisher with extensive experience gained over 36 years. Their work has received wide recognition which has earned them financial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Their publications focus on narratives that might otherwise remain silenced and includes collections of creative writing as well as local community histories. Queenspark are the university’s official printing partner and this mutually beneficial relationship has allowed our students’ literature to grow and develop in partnership with that of local communities. Waterloo Press is a small local press established to provide platforms for new writers. The press has established a strong catalogue of poetry and prose and is committed to promoting the work of local writers. As a result of working with these community organisations and in discussing issues of social consciousness and sustainability the authors were inspired to design an undergraduate module that would develop these existing strengths and actively involve students in ongoing debates about the relationship between literature and sustainability.

An inter-disciplinary (Creative Writing and Literature) teaching team worked with external experts to offer innovative experiences of the topics under discussion. Collaborating with local practitioners students drew on their local community to make links between their learning at university and the world beyond.  Working with the local short story collective *Short Fuse*, students engaged in a creative writing workshop concerned with the relationship between the individual and society. After this event, students were offered an exclusive opportunity to enter their creations into the Short Fuse local writing competition with the winner appearing at their monthly event at local community arts venue, The *Komedia* in December 2010. Engaging in a workshop with local comedy writer Jill Edwards, students thought about promoting social consciousness, performed their work and presented their agendas to the outside world. Combining work in literature with the real world of publishing and commissioning, Jill encouraged students to articulate their beliefs to a diverse range of audiences. While working on Anthony Cartwright’s latest novel *Heartland*, students considered how literature can help us to understand why a community might turn to the politics of the extreme right in times of political and social transition while local crime writer Peter James joined students for a session on novel writing. He answered some questions about his work, his role in the promotion of the social consciousness of crime, the impact of crime on the community and why the Brighton community forms the backdrop to much of his work.

At the beginning of the module students were asked to sign a consent form saying that they agreed to take part in the research and were happy for their comments to be used in presentations and publications, while the authors would attempt to ensure their anonymity, this could not be guaranteed. At the end of the module, students were asked to take part in a focus group so that we could gain insight into their experience of the module and evaluate the impact of a heightened awareness of sustainable living on their personal, academic and vocational development.

**Student feedback for the module**

Feedback from the student focus group suggests that;

1. The workshop environment was effective in raising students’ awareness about sustainable living and of their ongoing personal development, and it enabled them to identify the skills *they were acquiring in HE and how these might relate to their post-degree* ambitions. One student commented, ‘*my writing style, initially, was very ornate and over-the-top, but now I find I’m trying to make it more succinct, concise, but whilst maintaining my personal kind of experience on it by writing about something I’m passionate about.’ (Val)*
2. The students benefit from participating in creative workshops led by local writers, actors, politicians and comedians. ‘*I just want to do creative writing. I enjoy it far more than my other subjects, so I think I might try and do that. I like it because it’s actually given me a reason, this lesson [to write],’ (Ali)*

*‘ It’s given us direct examples from the industry. It shows that it’s attainable if you work hard enough.’ (Tim)*

1. Students benefited from the opportunity to discuss their world view and writing process with their peers and tutor. These sessions provided opportunities for the students to identify their own processes and to consider how they were developing as practitioners and learners.

‘*I found the feedback process horrifying – you comment every week how scared I looked […]. And that stopped a couple of weeks ago but […] I found it really good. I mean, I’ve stopped shaking when I read my stuff out loud, so I’m really glad I took this module because now I’m not so terrified of reading out my work out loud.’ (Jane)*

*‘I think the pressure that we have to read our work and get feedback has been really good because I would never have shown my work otherwise. So I think it’s easier every time you do it – it makes it that bit easier’ (Roiseen)*

1. The students’ experience of the writer/actor/comedian/politician led workshops was both enjoyable and beneficial, with students welcoming the opportunity to discuss and debate their writing in an informal setting, outside their normal learning environment. This enabled them to see the value of their discipline in the world and their own value within their discipline.

*Tutor: So it’s something about applying what you’re learning to the real world?*

*Group: Yes*

*Tutor: Do you think you would’ve got that without the guest speakers?*

*Abi: No.*

*Tutor: From your other modules, do you think you’ve had that awareness from other modules?*

*Group: No. Not at all.*

1. The module helped students to articulate their learning in more depth and with more confidence than in other modules. This in turn supported their development as undergraduate researchers and helped them to use the experiences they had gathered outside HE to enrich their creative writing without feeling vulnerable or exposed. ‘*I’m really excited about coming in [to the lecture] and reading it out and getting feedback [and] just to get, like, recognition for your work’. (Ali)*
2. Students’ confidence in their written work was enhanced by constructive feedback and encouragement from tutors, guest speakers and peers.

*‘I think the opportunity of being able to read our writing out loud and get feedback is like really rewarding because when I’m at home reading out my writing I’m just told to shut up. Well, it’s not quite like that, basically they can’t be bothered.’ (Jane)*

1. In focusing on sustainable living, workshops helped the students to consider their place in the world and how their teaching and learning experiences might help them evolve as learners and people.

‘*I think that if anyone really looks at the world we live in and the situation the world is in and our species is in, they are angry […] and if we don’t have the sort of ways of exorcising our anger or discontent with things through writing, or through the media that surrounds us […] then the alternative is you just become a bitter and distant person. So, if at the very least you’re not trying to change the world, at least you’re selfishly doing it for yourself to feel better about it.’ (James)*

**Conclusion**

Outputs from the module included an anthology of poetry looking at mental health issues, a film script set in post-apocalyptic Brighton, a short story about female sterilisation in order to curb population expansion and a dramatic monologue exploring the effects of Capitalism. The feedback from the focus group and students’ assessed reflective commentaries suggests that the students clearly understood the benefits of discussing socially responsible writing and their own potential impact on a sustainable future. They learned how this might be achieved through their writing, but also through their work and lives post-university study. Enabling and empowering students to consider how they might make meaningful changes in the world contributes not only to their university experience but to a more hopeful future for us all. Undoubtedly, the contributions of local writers and professionals to the workshops offered the module were invaluable in terms of providing students with unique insights on the world beyond the classroom and encouraging them to consider their own personal, vocational and academic development in post-degree life.

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Biography

Dr Katy Shaw is a senior lecturer in the School of Humanities at the University of Brighton. Her research interests and specialism's include an inter-disciplinary, theoretical expertise on the specific field of the intersection between creative and factual writing during the 1984-5 miners’ strike, the history and literature of the Thatcher era and its aftermath and Gothic influence in post industrial images of decline and representations of loss and absence in literature. Dr Shaw is currently writing a book on the author, David Peace.

Jess Moriarty is a senior lecturer in the School of Humanities at the University of Brighton where she specialises in Creative Writing. Jess is currently finishing her thesis on the process of academic writing where she combines poetry, scripts and autobiography to tell the story of her research. Jess won a Teaching Excellence Award in 2007 and seeks to boost students’ confidence and motivation with the writing process.