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Taking the Imaginative Leap: Creative Writing and Inquiry-Based Learning

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The drums of the grieving village,
Fatafinduu. (Africa)
Losing my sense of self,
Ite mu jumaa le ti? (Who are you?)
Almighty Allah, nna ninin kaaroo jaabi
(Answer my question)
The brotherhood.
N bee mu hadamadijo le ti. (We are all human beings)
—Zoe Carson

In the poem cited in the epigraph, a student of English language and literature, twenty-one years old, just beginning the second year of her degree in a “red-brick” university in the north of England, attempts to articulate the voice of an African captive on board an eighteenth-century slave vessel, the *Lord Ligonier*, as it crosses the Atlantic on its way to the port of Annapolis. Zoe produced this poem in response to a task set by us, her teachers. She and the rest of her class were required to read the depiction of the Middle Passage in Alex Haley’s novel *Roots* (1977) and respond to the material by writing a short piece of poetry. This task formed part of a course, the aim of which was to help students understand the various “modes of inquiry” through which knowledge is made within the discipline of English studies. Creative writing can, of course, be an end in itself and is often taught as such in academic institutions, but the idea that it can constitute a mode of inquiry within a traditional literature course is less immediately obvious. This activity was intended to use creative writing as a way of exploring the perennial problem of whether one can ever “voice the other,” a central question in contemporary literary scholarship. Zoe’s poem demonstrates that the process of responding imaginatively to a text like Haley’s can produce a sophisticated understanding of this central problem if it is embedded in appropriate pedagogical practice.

The first thing that strikes the reader after even a casual glance at

the poem is the juxtaposition of English and non-English words. The poem attempts to create an African voice through the use of an African language. Zoe searched hard to find the source of Mandinka words and phrases from which this material comes. At one level, the English glosses help the reader to understand the other language. But by including the two languages within single lines of poetry and simultaneously separating them through both punctuation and rhythmic structure, the poem foregrounds the *process* of translation. This is important, first, because translation is a central issue in Haley's depiction of the Middle Passage. Although his captives do not all share a language, they manage to communicate and articulate a new identity with the proclamation: "Though we are of different tribes and tongues, remember that we are the same people! We must be as one village, together in this place" (163). Zoe's text draws attention to the fact that, in practice, this new sense of brotherhood is articulated in English. She suggests that this use of English is simultaneously a loss. The phrase "losing my sense of self" does not appear in Mandinka but only appears in English. It is followed by two interrogatives that ask the archetypal question of identity, "Ite mu jumaa le ti? (Who are you?)" The previous allusion to loss suggests that the English gloss is an *encroachment* on the Mandinka text and not merely a supplement to it. This suggestion has a metatextual function. This is *not* the voice of a native Mandinka speaker, and the poet cannot represent such a voice in an "authentic" way. The poem plays upon the suspect status of the Mandinka phrases incorporated within it by alluding within its form to the dictionary from which they were cut and pasted. The very fact that the terms appear in the Roman script demonstrates that the words have already passed through a process of Western transcription. And the appearance of the phonetic character hangma (ŋ) in the final line highlights the fact that the source of the Mandinka material is a technical linguistic text. Any reader critical of the poet for presuming to speak for the African other is challenged by the poem's awareness of its own problematic status.

Furthermore, although the poem suggests interaction, it leaves the identity of the participants ambiguous. At one level, the text represents the interaction of captives in the hold of a slave ship. At another, it may dramatize the impossible task of imagining a historical context from which the contemporary student is so far distant. "Ite mu jumaa le ti? (Who are you?)" may be uttered by one captive to another or by the student to the lost figure at the center of her poem. The fact that the Mandinka phrases were purloined from a dictionary makes them particularly appropriate for the latter kind of interaction. The student is a stranger in the historical past making use of a

phrase book as a traveler might in a foreign country. The unifying statement “We are all human beings” implies the bonding of the contemporary student in England and the historical character, but, once again, the juxtaposition and formal separation of the two languages implies the impossibility of such bonds and thus the impossibility of narrating the Middle Passage itself in any “authentic” sense.

Implicit in Zoe’s poem is an acute understanding of some important literary problems. But, as we suggested earlier, the production of the poem can function as a powerful mode of inquiry only if it is embedded in appropriate pedagogical practice and supported with appropriate learning resources. The process of developing appropriate practice began long before Zoe wrote her poem, gathered pace as we responded to what she and her peers had done, and is still ongoing.

The rest of this essay will discuss the process by which we came to use creative writing as a way to investigate a literary text. The first part discusses some of the pedagogical problems we wish to address. The second part deals with the institutional context of the work, and in particular our involvement in a university-wide forum, aimed at developing a practice for research-led teaching in higher education focusing on inquiry-based learning (IBL), and the important process of department consultation that we initiated following from more general discussion at the university level. The essay then moves on to describe the planning and delivery of the course, considering the vital role played by our media-rich virtual learning environment (VLE) and the flexible, technology-rich teaching space developed as part of the university project. Finally, we will reflect on the extent to which the course in general and the creative writing activities in particular helped us to overcome some of the problems we had experienced in teaching our research areas.

“Roots/Routes,” the course for which the poetry-writing task was developed, is a project in the Centre for Inquiry-Based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences (CILASS), based at the University of Sheffield. CILASS is a CETL (Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England.¹ The aim of the project was to develop a first-semester, second-year interdisciplinary course in which students studied just one text — Alex Haley’s *Roots* — but looked at that text from a number of different perspectives and, in the process, learned more about the different modes of inquiry that are commonly used in the discipline of English studies. We chose to work on *Roots* because it occupies a position at the intersection of our own areas of specialty, Dr. Steadman-Jones working in the fields of postcolonial studies and linguistics and Dr. van Oostrum in

African American literature and film. One of the frustrations we had both experienced arose from a gap between the cultures of research and teaching. Recent research on African American writing has tended toward a global approach, which seeks to trace connections among the cultures and experiences of the African diaspora. In his *Americanization and the Teaching of American Studies (AMATAS)* work, for example, Alan Rice (n.d.) shows how the scholarly emphasis on black studies located within the United States “devalued the sterling work of the Birmingham school wherein scholars like Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy were sketching more subtle maps of the African diaspora that foregrounded relations between the Caribbean, Europe, Africa and the Americas that problematised some of the assumptions of the Black Studies discipline.” Paul Gilroy’s book *The Black Atlantic* (1993) opened up new areas of inquiry by highlighting this global approach. However, in undergraduate teaching it can be difficult to explore this more sophisticated landscape. With the best intentions, classroom discussion can tend to reinforce the familiar binaries between self and other, to use Said’s terms, or elite and subaltern, to use Spivak’s. Indeed, it may be that the teaching of African American and postcolonial courses separate from the main curriculum simply serves to exacerbate this problem.

One of the reasons we chose Haley’s novel *Roots* as the primary text for our course was precisely for its focus on the transatlantic, triangular trade. Another was the fact that the immense popularity of the book and miniseries demonstrated that the story had a tremendous cross-cultural appeal, an appeal that arose from the family focus of Haley’s narrative and the soap-opera style of the television production. Interracial and transatlantic interactions form a thematic feature of *Roots*, and as such are an obvious teaching topic. Within our IBL approach to the text, we employed activities in which students were constantly asked to reflect on their positions as readers and as students of *Roots*. The poem quoted earlier reflects implicitly on the status of the Middle Passage as a route within the black Atlantic and on the twenty-first-century reader’s position in relation to it. However, making this link explicit proved more difficult. One of the bigger surprises in the course came when we asked the students to evaluate three different readings of the same page of *Roots* and consider their appropriateness as if they were producers developing a radio program. For different reasons, none of the readers, a young African American from Texas, an older speaker of Nigerian English, and a Londoner with a black British accent, were deemed adequate. But although the students had very definite views about these three different readers, it had not occurred to them to reflect on their own voicing of the text—the

way in which they heard both Haley's narrative voice and the voices of his characters in their own heads. Similarly, by asking the students to write an autobiographical narrative of their own, one in some way connected with the experiences of the slave trade, we pushed them to consider the way in which fictionalized history is connected with modern identity positions. Since most of the students were British and white, they had to acknowledge that if their family had had any involvement in the slave trade, they would probably have been complicit with it. Some of them tried to salvage their fictional family's reputations by presenting them as abolitionists or focusing on Romeo and Juliet-style love stories rather than on the material realities of slavery. Reflecting upon this impulse led us to talk about the process of genealogical research and the meaning of this creative process. We felt that teaching this course would in turn help us with strategies of teaching our research.

Before designing the course, we held preclassroom consultations with colleagues across the School of English. These discussions took place in the context of eight "teaching and learning clusters," each of which focused on a different mode of inquiry commonly used in the study of English: history, theory, close reading, writing, performance, science, technology, and sources. The eight groups met over the course of the academic year 2005–6 with a brief to consider how we might improve the teaching of each mode of inquiry and, in particular, help students to see themselves as autonomous—or, at least, more autonomous—practitioners in each area. Typically, the sessions were articulated into three phases: an initial exploration of problems, an examination of how we might address those problems in an ideal world, and a final discussion of how we might move some way toward that ideal state, given the resources actually available to us. CILASS made £400 available per cluster to make the ideas generated in the final phase of discussion into a reality.

In spite of the small scale of the projects, almost all the clusters produced innovative ideas and came up with interesting ways of making their particular mode of inquiry more central to students' experience. The writing cluster met for the first time on 2 November 2005, and the initial group consisted of eight members of staff from across the School of English. In the initial discussion of problems, all the participants expressed the view that there was a gap in our students' experience of different modes of writing. Within the curriculum, they suggested, "writing" essentially meant the production of conventional academic essays and, although many students and, indeed, members of staff, engaged in creative writing, they did so in their own time and not in the context of the classroom. However, during the three-hour dis-

discussion, in which we shared our existing practice and experience, it became clear that we were already using creative writing as a mode of inquiry much more than we had realized. One course, American Literature of the Avant-Garde, required students to create a “public poem”; the required first-year core course in English literature offered a prize for a sonnet; another course specifically investigated technologically produced criticism and creative writing; and a few courses required students to write two-hundred-word column-style responses in a VLE. Aside from these particular instances, there were more fuzzy areas where the distinction between “academic” and “creative” writing became increasingly problematic. When students are asked to rewrite the opening paragraph of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* from the perspective of another character, for example, does this imaginative task not require the same kind of insight into character, style, and narrative as an academic essay written on the same text? In all cases, the question of assessing creative work was hotly debated but not seen as an insurmountable obstacle. At the end of the lively session, three main desiderata emerged: the need to consolidate and bring coherence to existing practice; the need to bridge the academic and creative worlds of English in our department; and the need to recommend and provide guidelines for more creative assessment practices throughout the department.

At the time these discussions took place, the school offered no outlet for creative writing — no context in which it could be published and disseminated — and the writing group decided to spend its money on the creation of an open-sourced online writing magazine for the School of English. This publication was subsequently named *Route 57* (www.route57.group.shef.ac.uk; the School of English is situated on the A57, the main route from Sheffield into the Peak District). The creation of the magazine was intended to provide a space in which creative work generated in individual courses could be gathered and showcased, thus consolidating the range of work already under way. It was also intended to offer a home for creative work produced by students and staff outside the classroom and, in this way, bridge the perceived gap between academic writing undertaken within and creative writing produced outside the curriculum. The magazine was also intended to facilitate the third of our objectives, that of raising awareness of creative assessment practices and providing a sense of how they might function in practice. As the first edition shows, students and staff engaged actively with the new publication, and material flowed in for all categories covered by the magazine: poetry, short fiction, nonfiction, experimental writing, and drama. Each section has its own editorial team, consisting of a combination

of staff and students. Furthermore, the general editor, Adam Piette, exemplifies the bridging of the academic and creative worlds, as a published writer in both arenas.

Some of the work included in the first edition was inspired by material covered in the academic curriculum — a beat version of *Alice in Wonderland*, for example — and this confirmed our sense that *Route 57* could function as a specific outlet for writing produced within the curriculum. In their first required course in the school, Introduction to Advanced Literary Studies, students are now immediately introduced to *Route 57* and offered a chance to get published. In this genre-based course, the students can compete for three prizes and the opportunity to see their work published. The categories are sonnet (the end rhymes are given [shouted] by the students in a lecture), fiction (rewriting a prose text), and drama review (students saw Harold Pinter's play *The Caretaker* at the Crucible Theatre as part of the course). The winning entries were published in the 2007 edition of *Route 57*, and we hope that all students will participate in the journal during their time at Sheffield. The recommendation that staff adopt varied creative assessment in courses has been taken up slowly, but the Web site does offer colleagues a way of motivating students to choose creative assignments rather than more traditional coursework options.

When we came to design the experimental course Roots/Routes, we drew upon the discussions that had taken place in the teaching clusters, among them the exploration of creative writing as a mode of inquiry. We hoped that students would emerge from the course with increased initiative and an ability to use a range of different methods in the examination of literary texts. Indeed, the full title of the course — Roots-Routes: Eight Things to Do with a Text — reflects this goal. As part of the vision of CILASS, the course uses practices associated with the philosophy of inquiry-based learning, always putting students in situations in which they need to explore texts — and modes of investigation — autonomously, whether as individuals or in groups. For all activities, students were also required to reflect on the process of learning and on the knowledge and skills they had acquired. Even though writing was allocated just one week in the syllabus, it was part of a package of creative modes of inquiry that also included performance (planning a dramatization of the text), close reading (recasting a portion of the text stylistically and evaluating the results), and technology (creating a hypertextual version of part of the novel). Students were required to produce one piece of assessed work relating to these creative activities.

The course recruited students evenly from across the school, which offers programs in English language and linguistics, English literature, and English language and literature combined. The modes of inquiry we covered were intended to represent a mix of approaches found across these disciplinary areas and, in this way, reflect the makeup of the school as a whole. In order to deliver the course, we were lucky to have amazing teaching and learning resources: a virtual teaching space in WebVista, designed by Steve Collier from the Learning, Development, and Media Unit (LDMU), and, to quote one of the students, a “futuristic” teaching space, the CILASS Collaboratory, which was specifically designed for IBL activities. In the Collaboratory, seating arrangements were flexible; plasma screens could display staff and student activities; we were able to watch the *Roots* television series in full surround sound; students could brainstorm on electronic huddle boards and present their group work electronically; and laptops were available for group activities and on-the-spot research. In addition to using our colleagues’ assistance in the teaching clusters, we also drew on expertise from the library and the central CILASS team, Pam McKinney in particular. All the learning resources contributed to a positive environment for students to unleash their creativity.

The VLE proved essential for designing clear activities that could be done either before the lecture or during a weekly two-hour seminar. It also offered flexibility and the opportunity for students to read each other’s work. For the writing week, two activities had been planned. The first one is given verbatim from the Web site:

TASK 1

Post on the bulletin board.

- Read chapter 37 (you should know it well by now) and write a short poem (form/genre/length all up to you) on any aspect, event, character you wish.
- Reflect on the writing of the poem (why the form/genre/length/aspect/event/character, etc.) and whether this mode of investigation has an effect on your reading of this chapter.

The second task was to be done during the two-hour seminar and was intended to reflect some of Alex Haley’s own choices as a writer of fiction, (auto)biographer, and historian. In particular, it was intended to confront students with some knotty problems about the nature of genealogy as a search for identity.

TASK 2

Seminar Activity

- Choose a pro-slavery character in *Roots* and link her/him to your own autobiography, using plausible historical routes. Be creative. All aspects of the course could be incorporated (HISTORY, THEORY, PERFORMANCE, TECHNOLOGY, etc.). The form/genre of your work is also up to you (short story, dialogue, poem, drama, hypertext, etc).
- Reflect on this creative genealogical journey.

Zoe Carson's poetry illustrates one of the prelecture responses to the first task. The task and the teaching also delivered some surprises for us. At first we were delighted with the material that the task elicited. All the students posted poems in the VLE, each more original than the last. They used a range of forms, including ballads and even a limerick. But the classroom discussion in which we explored this work was the least animated and the most difficult of the entire course. Despite the lively quality of their written work, the students seemed remarkably reluctant to talk. Eventually we gave up on plenary discussion and put them into groups to discuss individual poems, but eliciting contributions was still like the proverbial pulling of teeth. Indeed, the ultimate put-down came when one of the students muttered that this was GCSE work (i.e., the kind of work students do for the General Certificate of Secondary Education, usually taken when they are sixteen years old). By way of explanation, he said that the last time an assignment like this had been put to them was when he was preparing for GCSE and concluded that such a mode of inquiry is not "serious" enough for university-level work. Yet, on the bulletin board, the students had been their usual witty and comfortable selves as they discussed the process of writing their poem, what they had attempted to convey, and how it made them reread the primary text. See, for example, part of Zoe Carson's accompanying bulletin board entry (12 November):

I'm no poet either! But I was trying to evoke the feeling of community within the hold and the attempt at communication amongst the slaves. I used certain Mandinka phrases (probably incorrectly, but you can see what I'm getting at!) in order to create a feeling of African "authenticity", and to highlight the problem of communicating in different languages. For example, without the translation, the reader would not be able to understand the Mandinka thus evoking the sense of isolation which would have occurred within the hold. In contrast, I mentioned Allah as Haley used religion in *Roots* as a means of uniting people together in their faith.

The question "who are you?" relates to Kunta's continued effort to remain

true to Africa, the communication between slaves in close proximity, and perhaps the focus on Allah in surviving the ordeal of the middle passage.

This reflection is interesting because of its limitations. It does not seem to struggle with the difficulty of the work that it describes, even though the poem itself constitutes a powerful response to those difficulties. And this, we finally realized, was what was making this hour particularly difficult. Of all the creative tasks we set, this one proved to be the most private and the one in which students felt most exposed. Although they were able to talk comfortably about the conventions of poetry (stressed and unstressed syllables, whether or not to use rhyme), they found it much more stressful to reflect on the experience of writing the poem. As Richard put it on the blog we incorporated in the VLE in order to share our perceptions of the course with the students:

(Nov 23):

In pretty much all English Literature courses, students are introduced to literary theory and encouraged to apply it to the texts they are studying. But if you are the author yourself, how does it feel to have your work scrutinised in this way? In particular, how does it feel when readers “find” things in your work that you didn’t know were there? One, rather naive, criticism of literary theory is that authors often aren’t aware of the issues that are so central to critics and theorists. And the experience of having things “found” in your writing that you didn’t know were really there makes that issue real. It dramatises the idea that the text has a life of its own beyond what the author intended—that it’s “out there” in the world, speaking to readers in different ways, whatever the author originally intended to say. And, as Hannah said, this is particularly scary for the author when a framework like psychoanalysis is applied to the text.²

What was powerful about this task was that it brought alive a range of theoretical issues concerning the difficulty of representation. When students read about these issues in books of literary theory, they often remain cold, abstract, and remote. But when they arise from the process of producing creative writing, they seem much more alive. We came to feel that the students’ sense of being exposed arose from exactly this experience of turning a critical eye upon their own work. We realized that our task as facilitators of learning was to help students turn these feelings of vulnerability to good use—to explore them and to understand where they came from and what their implications were. It is sometimes said that the logical consequence of IBL is to make university teachers redundant. If students’ learning increas-

ingly arises from their own independent inquiry, then what role is left for the “expert” teacher? In a sense, our experience with the poetry task answers this question. The activity itself provided valuable opportunities for learning, but only when the students had been eased through their initial reluctance to speak — perhaps even to think — about their own reactions to what they had done. It is interesting that many of them chose to use their poems as the basis of the work they submitted for assessment, despite their initial skepticism about the value of the session. Of all the activities and inquiries in the course, the poetry task required the greatest imaginative leap. It gave the students insight into what being an author is far more than any of our lectures could have. In some cases, it also brought home to the students how far removed we are from the world of *Roots* but also how interconnected. When this kind of process unfolds unconsciously and unintentionally, it can even bring home to learners something of the magic of writing.

Notes

1. For more information on CILASS, see www.shef.ac.uk/cilass.
2. We found our blog very useful as a way to provide feedback about the sessions and to get our own interpretations out there. With the students taking such an active part, it was sometimes difficult to give our own readings, and it could make instructors feel fairly superfluous.

Work Cited

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