Reflections on A334 – English Literature 1500-1815

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In this note, I will discuss:

- my general experience of A334 and of studying English Literature, something I have not done since doing 'O' levels in the late 1960s
- whether I found the module enjoyable and what made it so
- my thoughts on why I found the module rather more difficult than I expected
- how my A334 experience compared to the other OU modules that I have completed
- how my OU experience compared to some of the graduate and postgrad remote learning environments I have participated in
- what could be done to improve the module

How did I come to A334?

I retired in 2019 after a career in software engineering and decided I would like to do some of the 'arty' things I had enjoyed at school but never had time to do when pursuing an engineer/electronics/acoustics track at university. I wanted to see if I could write short stories, poetry, scripts or even a novel. So, I did the *A215 Creative Writing* module in 2019/20 and the *A363 Advanced Creative Writing* module in 2020/21. I enjoyed these modules and certainly learnt a lot (and equally learned I had a lot more to learn) and my writing improved substantially (Sinclair 2022a). (I also joined several writing groups and did

courses at Arvon and Jericho Writers). Since I'd exhausted the OU's stock of creative writing modules, I thought I'd go from poacher to gamekeeper and study writing from the reader's point of view. My rationale was that by studying a wide range of different writers' techniques and approaches I would strengthen my own writing toolkit and skills. So, I did the *A334 English Literature (1500-1815)* module in 2021/22 and planned to do *A335 Literature in Transition: 1800 to the present* in 2022/23.

My overall reaction to A334

Although I was very familiar with working with academic methods, journals and text in science and engineering (Sinclair 2022b) I found the academic aspects of English Literature to be a bit of a culture shock. I enjoyed reading the set texts, but I felt distinctly allergic to much of the literary criticism that the module presented in relation to these texts. I thoroughly enjoyed most of the set books (the Petrarchan poets, Shakespeare, Elizabethan poetry, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, the Cavalier Poets, Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, Lady Montagu's *Embassy Letter*s, the late 18C poets and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion*). I didn't like Moliere's *Tartuffe* (the rhyming couplets became very tedious to my ear after a while), Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (too long), Rousseau's *Confessions* (too self-absorbed and much, much too long) and *As You Like It* (not funny, at least to my taste, and come on guys, just get a room and get on with it). However, I think it was a good thing the module included set texts which I did not personally enjoy. It was still interesting and illuminating to understand why those texts and authors are well thought of, and how the authors went about their craft. And in any case, as each TMA is set so that you can choose from a couple of the set texts, I don't think my lack of enthusiasm for some authors was a problem.

Generally, I found A334 quite a lonely experience. The OU Forums for the course were sparsely used, and there were no face-to-face tutor groups this year. This was also true, but slightly less so, in the creative writing modules I had studied in previous years so I don't see that as an A334-specific issue.

Course materials

I thought the A334 course materials were excellent, and the tutorials were well presented. The issues raised in many of the exercises and suggestions for independent study in the course book were interesting. I found reading some of the literary criticism texts quite hard work and in some cases, rather frustrating. Two examples: (1) Foucault's essay on the nature of the author seemed to have little practical relevance and was essentially an exercise in abstruse intellectual reasoning. I felt Foucault had not considered important aspects of what it means to be an author as he did not consider the author as defined by the reader's reaction to the author's output. (2) The discussion of literary eco-criticism in the Jane Austen chapter seemed to me to be a bridge too far in the sense that it was searching for 20th concerns that the authors of the 19th century would have no concept of or interest in. Such criticism was therefore an artificial interpretation that was being laid upon Austen's work, based on our 20th-century concerns and therefore not really relevant in understanding Austin as an author in the context of the 19th century.

I loved having access to the OU library. The librarians were also super helpful. I was surprised just how much material was available online. It would be great (but maybe not a good commercial decision) to allow OU alumni to continue to access the library for life. I remember that was the case when I graduated from a brick university in the 1970s.

The TMAs

I found the TMAs in A334 to be much more demanding than those in A215/A363. Part of this was the requirement to produce an essay in the desired academic style.   Answering the TMAs was much less fun than the creative writing in A215/A363.   I was surprised (though, on reflection, I probably should not have been) by the strong emphasis in A334 on reading and analysing critical essays and texts relating to the set book. Maybe 40% of the course is about understanding the canon of literary criticism for these books, 30% is about understanding the social, political, economic and religious environment that the authors operated within, and 30% is about close reading of the set texts (e.g., understanding and analysing the language, vocabulary, literary techniques of the author). Only a small part of the course (in my opinion) involves analysing your own personal emotional response to the works, and none of the course is directly about relating the various authors' styles, themes and techniques to your own creative works. Of course, the module is about the critical analysis of literature and not creative writing. But what is the point of analysis if it does not also teach you about synthesis?

I appreciated the very detailed feedback I received on my assignments. I found it fair, accurate and helpful. However, I was not quite sure how I should use suggestions that I should unpack a concept further or that I should provide further levels of detail to support my argument. My difficulties often lay with managing what I wanted to say within the word count. Perhaps I should have unpacked the idea further, but that would consume more word count and result in me unpacking other arguments somewhat less. Suppose there are ten points you wish to make in say, 2500 words. In that case, you only have 250 words per point, so it is difficult, if not impossible, to go into detail for every point, particularly as some of the word count will be taken up with quotes from either the set text or the literary criticism, leaving even less for detailed discussion.   Maybe I should have only selected five points and thus given myself more words to use per point. I don't feel the TMA questions or rubric gave clear guidance on the correct approach. I understand that different arguments/points will have different relative importance within the essay, so they will not all need the same amount of detailed attention. Part of the trick in writing a good essay is correctly selecting the proper priority for each argument or discussion point.   However, this is pretty hard within the very short word counts for the TMAs.

I found the TMA (and EMA) questions rather opaque, in the sense that it was hard to identify precisely what aspects of the set texts I should discuss and what arguments I should present. I found this rather demotivating, as I began to feel that whatever I wrote probably would not align well with what was being looked for in the tutor's marking template. I would have much preferred more explicit wording in the questions rather than the somewhat tangential, even coy style that was employed. For example, I would have preferred questions in the following form:

1. Contrast the differing approaches taken by the Elizabethan and Cavalier Poets in professing the sincerity of their admiration for love, women and authority and discuss what motivated these differences.
2. Did Montagu and Austen intend to advance the cause of women in society through their writings, and did they succeed?
3. Hamlet can be seen to be the battle between conscience and duty, individual and state, virtue and sin, corruption and innocence. Discuss the merits of these comparisons.

As they stand, these are probably not suitable questions for a TMA, but I do feel they provide plenty of scope for the student to show their detailed knowledge of the texts and the literary critics and provide space for the student to present their own critical analysis. Most importantly, they have a clarity that I did not find in the module questions.

My impression from social media and the forums is that other students doing the module also had difficulties decoding the question. For an example, see: https://learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/discuss.php?d=4071537&clone=1680559 for an expression of that view in a post-EMA discussion of the module.

The EMA

I made a very determined effort to gain a good mark in the EMA. This did not turn out particularly well. I was quite surprised that my extra effort and careful consideration of my tutor's detailed and helpful feedback from previous TMAs had produced a decrease rather than an increase in marks.

Did I enjoy it?

Not really. I very much like studying the set books, but I don't think I ever got to grips with the scholarly style required for the TMAs, the skills needed to properly understand the TMA questions, or the skills needed to relate the close reading of the texts to the academic arguments presented in my TMA assignment. This rather undermined the enjoyment of the course. In addition, there was too much emphasis on academic literary criticism for my taste. Okay, what did I expect in an English Literature module?). I think, too I would have been happier with A335 as the set works are more modern and, to my mind, more relevant to our experiences today. Yes, I know Hamlet is a timeless study of the meaning of life, but I find it much more effort to decode the language in *Hamlet* than say more modern works such as *Far from the Madding Crowd* or *A Clockwork Orange* (just picking two works from A335 at random). I think I enjoyed the creative writing modules more because I found them less didactic (or do I mean dogmatic?) The creative writing modules developed close reading and analytic skills in a similar way to A334 but in those modules, those skills were then used in a practical way to write prose or poetry. Suppose the ultimate purpose of the A334 is to develop close reading and analytic skills simply to be able to argue for or against the existing canon of literary criticism. In that case, I personally find that a much less interesting objective.

I think I was partly grumpy because much of the body of the literary criticism sources that were an integral part of the course were often written (in my opinion) using necessarily complex prose, with a rich vocabulary of literary terms that made the meaning somewhat opaque. I thought many failed to give a crisp summary of their basic thesis, and the author's points were buried deep within a framework of dense exposition. In essence, I did not think they would get excellent marks if submitted as a TMA answer. Of course, since I just plunged straight in at level 3, maybe if I had done levels 1 and 2 would have trained to be more accepting of the academic literary criticism style and of the need to analyse, understand and use the critics.

Was the course content what I expected?

As I have said, I felt that the course assessment was more about researching and writing about the canon of literary criticism than about exploring the set texts in great depth or about relating the set texts to our modern experience, morals, religion or society. It took me a while to understand the rather strict and inflexible style of writing required in the TMAs. This style differed from that I had experienced when studying literature as part of the A215/A363 modules or elsewhere. By concentrating on the existing canon of literary criticism, the course missed several significant opportunities. Little of the literary criticism canon or the course materials directly examined the relation of the literature of 1500-1815 to our modern experiences, morals, lifestyles and sensibilities. While there are many interesting examples of love, sex, religious intolerance, religious ideas and doctrines, discussions of political power and corruption, humour, feminism, abuse, violence etc. in the literature that was studied, and these are universal themes, these themes were explored only in their historical context.

What is the point of literature if it does not inform us about ourselves and in some way make us look at how we live today and behave? For example, Montagu's discussion of the male gaze on oriental women or her stunningly forthright racism seems an excellent springboard for examining how these issues are dealt with by literature today. Still, I don't think such a comparison was within the scope of the course. I felt a much more powerful educational experience would be provided if the A334 and A335 modules were taught in a less historically layered way. For example, studying a topic such as 'the site of power in gender politics' could use works across many centuries, such as *As You Like It,* the Elizabethan poets, Donne, *The Country Wife, The Embassy Letters*, Austen's novels, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Morrison's Beloved, the poems of Plath and Angelou and so on. But maybe that illustrates the problem with my suggestion. If you study themes across several centuries rather than just choosing a limited set of authors from each era, then the students (and tutors) will need to be familiar with an overwhelming number of works. So maybe I'm not making a practical suggestion. But I still think my aim is a good one - as students, I feel we need to relate historical literature to our own experiences - otherwise there is no value in reading that literature.

Was there anything missing?

The A334 course materials included some discussion of the social, political and religious environment that the set texts were written, performed and read in. As a non-religious

person, who did not study much history at school, there was a considerable amount of historical context that I did not know but was relevant to the set texts. For example, the different types of sin, the differences between Protestants and Catholics, the power politics of the monarchy and the aristocracy of each century and so on. Since this is a module on literature, I would not expect to be taught any of this directly as part of the module. But even skimming a lot in various history books and Wikipedia articles took a lot of time. I spent a couple of days trying to determine whether in Shakespeare's day the prevalent religious doctrines meant that Hamlet was a sinner and would not go to heaven in the end because he murdered Polonius and Claudius. It was interesting but time-consuming. I still don't know the answer. Maybe that's the point. Perhaps I was being overambitious (or even arrogant) doing A334 without studying the prerequisite level 2 modules.

There was some fascinating discussion of how the staging of plays changed over time, and this was very useful in understanding the plays in their contemporary context. The module also related some of the set works and authors to the art that was being produced at the same time (both portrait and landscape). However, there was little or no discussion of how literature paralleled the developments in opera, ballet, religious music and the various forms of instrumental entertainment (sonatas, symphonies, concertos, arias, and songs). If literature is to be studied in the context of the society that produces and reads it, then I think this is a significant omission.

My thoughts on the overall student experience

In A335, there was very little peer-to-peer student interaction. People only used the forums as far as they needed to (i.e. to generate material they could then submit in their early TMAs), and then they stopped altogether. Few people attended the tutorials (maybe 25% of the tutor group), and many did not speak but only listened to the material the tutor had prepared.

For me, a university experience should have a strong student discussion element, and this should be led by the tutor or a teaching assistant in a supportive and interactive way. The module is designed to develop independent thinking, and a key element of that is to be able to propose and defend an argument interactively in a group. While the module does teach independent thinking, and this is assessed in the TMAs, I feel that most jobs today require you to think independently in the context of a team. The OU concentrates on teaching the student to work as an individual and to think largely in isolation, with only a small number of interactions by email or forum with their tutor. I felt the concept of working in a team should in some way be included in the module (and indeed in most modules in most faculties). The A215/A363 modules were slightly better for me in this respect, but still far from optimum. Of course, there will also be some students who simply want to get the degree certificate and will avoid anything that does not directly 'count' towards their module marks. That is true at on-campus universities too.

Maybe the argument is that the OU is a remote learning organisation and is intrinsically non-interactive. That may have been the case a few decades ago, but the emergence of the web, social media, the proliferation of email, and the high bandwidth delivery of media on demand into the home have all radically changed the world we live in. Many other learning organisations are now making use of these facilities. Just having excellent module books and a small number of tutorials is perhaps no longer a sufficiently competitive position for a modern learning organisation.

One of the things that seemed to kill the Forums stone dead was the rule that any material posted on the forum could not be used in the TMA. This rule appeared in the Netiquette for the Tutor Group Forum:

There are just a few things that shouldn't be posted here:

* material that you intend to submit for assignments, unless you're otherwise instructed (i.e., for your assessed forum contributions for TMA01 and 02)

(Open University, 2022a)

I don't understand the rationale behind this. If you have a discussion on a campus university with a couple of friends in a coffee bar over whether or not Hamlet really did go to heaven, then no one would expect not to be able to use that material from that discussion in an essay. So how is a forum different? Here's an example of how this affected me. I was interested in Foucault's view of the author and tried to start a discussion on this topic in the Tutor Group Forum (Sinclair, 2022d). I put some quite detailed thoughts and analysis in multiple appends. However, having done this I realised that I could then not reproduce this material in a TMA answer. This was particularly ironic as there was no engagement in my comments from other students. This rule is not implemented in this way in other universities I have studied at. Or maybe I misunderstood the rule.

There is a problem, though with my enthusiasm for more peer and tutor interaction. My impression is that some OU students simply don't want to interact and only want to do the minimum possible to merely pass or get the grade they need and won't want to do anything that is not aligned to getting marks in the TMA. Often OU students are not only studying, but also doing a full or part-time job, bringing up a family or are committed elsewhere. So, if more interaction is offered optionally, it may not be taken up.

If attendance at interaction events is made mandatory, it may still not work very well, as no one can be forced to speak. Nevertheless, my opinion remains that students should be doing things that are not just focused exclusively on passing an exam assessment; otherwise the course is little more than a somewhat bland correspondence course. University is more than that, so student involvement and interactivity need to be baked into the course. University is often a preparation for a job and a career, and there are few careers where you can get away with never interacting or participating.

In some ways, I felt the 2021/22 OU experience was more of a simple correspondence course than the more kaleidoscopic experience associated with a university education. The things I missed were:

- Live interaction student to student and student to tutor. In particular, I missed the face-to-face tutorials where a tutor group met for a day or half a day in a physical classroom. I would really like to see this type of tutorial reinstated. The benefits of being able to talk to other students in a non-computer environment are really worth it. Not just to discuss specific questions about the set texts or critical sources but just, in general, to compare what sort of things people are finding difficult (e.g. interpreting the TMA questions) and to share opinions and ideas.

- 'Extra' activities that are related to but lie outside the module material. The LRAC lectures were very welcome in this respect. But if you go to a campus University, perhaps in a large city, there is a rich range of English Literature and Creative Writing activities going on in parallel to the undergrad and postgrad curriculum. These include events supporting many minorities and cultures, as well as providing access to talks/discussions from writing practitioners and academics. Obviously, the OU is not a campus university, but cannot the OU offer a similar experience in these days of connected tech? I have attended events in York, Manchester, Oxford and London, all without leaving my settee, so why not at the OU too?

- A discussion of the set texts in the context of our lives today. What can the set texts tell us about how we behave today regarding power, corruption, love, religion, feminism, gender politics, spousal abuse, sexual identity, etc.

What improvements could be made?

I think there are many ways the OU could make the course more engaging and interactive.

One possible improvement would be to modify the teaching model to include more face-to-face teaching and discussion using web conference technology. This is the model used by Modpo, a course in modern and contemporary U.S. poetry run by Prof Al Filreis at the University of Pennsylvania (Modpo, 2022). The Modpo teaching team not only includes career academics but also Teaching Assistants (TAs), who are often students who have completed the course and are continuing to pursue their education in related fields. The use of TAs is a powerful tool to augment the academic team and means there is sufficient teaching resource available to provide:

1. Weekly discussions by the teaching team of close reading of several poems by a particular poet of interest and to set these poems in their cultural context. The communication is primarily teacher-to-student, but a few student questions are usually taken. Attendance is by Zoom/

2. Regular 'office hours'. The teaching team members make themselves available for 1 hour per week, on zoom, for an interactive discussion of the poetry being discussed that week. Communication is two-way teacher to student/student to teacher and is interactive and real-time (unlike email or fora)

3. Online forums - here, the students can discuss the material being studied more leisurely and submit their own analysis of the poetry for review by other students or by the TAs. The forums are accessible to the many hundreds (or is it thousands?) of students who are actively doing the course that year, so if a student asks a question, there is likely to be someone who will answer or comment.

One key difference between the OU model and Modpo is Modpo's use of course-wide tutor and TA support. Any Modpo student can attend any of the teaching team's office hours. I think the problem with the OU model is that the students are partitioned into small tutor group units (10-20 students), so it is relatively easy for groups of this size to fail to reach critical mass in terms of peer-to-peer interaction. If the OU put all the tutor groups in one pool (say 120 students for A334?) then 20 or 30 students out of the total pool might be

interested in interacting. This I think would then achieve the critical mass to make the student interaction self-sustaining and would be a significant improvement over the present state of affairs. There is a broadly based 'English Literature' forum available to all A334 students, but without the driving force of tutors and TAs pushing the discussion along, it only occasionally flickered into life. The suggestion of using TAs is perhaps the most radical idea presented here so there would be many things to consider. Would they be paid? (They are not paid in Modpo as far as I know but being a TA would be seen as a good thing to have on your academic CV). How would they be qualified and trained? How would the OU monitor the quality of the assistance provided by the TAs? TAs probably would need to be drawn from those who have done A334 and A335 and are perhaps pursuing an English Literature MA. These individuals would still have an interest in English Literature and would be also interested in leading discussions to help others learn.

Perhaps there are also other ways to increase student/student and student/tutor engagement. For example, rather than have 15-20 students per tutor, and individual tutor group forums, use larger tutor groups, with, say, 50 students and 3 tutors. This would be aimed at getting student participation in the forums higher. Or keep tutor groups at 20 per tutor but use a single tutor group forum where everyone can see everyone else's contribution.

I did find the tutor lead OU Guest forum: 'Spenser and Book 1' on the subject of *Spenser's Fairie Queen* very useful and there was more student participation in this forum, presumably because it included all the tutor group members. It would be great if this model were applied to all the set works. If there is not enough tutor resource to do this, these forums could be run by TAs.

I also think the implementation of 'office hours' would be beneficial. The implementation I have in mind would be to make one or more A334 tutors available on Zoom or Teams for a 'drop in' session each week. Any student could attend and ask questions about the course content, approach to TMAs etc. Several students would likely be 'dropping in' at the same time, but that would have the added value that these students would hear the answers to each other's questions. Different tutors can do different weeks, allowing students to access a broad range of tutors. The same model could also be used with TAs.

I think the assessment/feedback mechanism could be improved as follows:

1. Some examples of well-written essays submitted for past TMA/EMA questions with annotations on why this essay is well written (and maybe some annotated examples of poorly written essays). This would be my favourite improvement.

2. Provide a small prize (e.g., a 25£ book token) for the best essay written for each TMA. These essays should be published. Or even better, publish every essay in the distinction category. I can see that some students would not want their work published, however good, so it could either be done anonymously, or students could opt out of the process. Hopefully, the monetary prize would encourage people to opt-in.

3. It would be beneficial to know when an assignment is explicitly returned where in the TMA marks were lost - e.g., if you got 75 out of 100, were five marks lost for poor formatting of references or ten marks? How many marks were lost because of muddled logical arguments? How man marks lost because of using an inappropriate

quotation. How much did missing commas, words incorrectly italicised, and deviations from the approved referencing scheme subtract from the marks?

4. I think it would be helpful if the tutors provided an annotated version of the feedback table that is used in the EMA. This would help the students identify exactly which areas they needed to improve on. (That information is, of course, provided in the tutorial feedback on the TMAs, but sometimes it is hard to see the wood for the trees). Of course, if suggestion (3) above was implemented, then this suggestion might not be necessary as it would be apparent in which category marks were being lost. Perhaps a combination of (3) and (4) would be the most effective way of helping the student identify where to improve, as shown in Figure 1 below.

Category	Marks lost/ Total marks	Comments
Knowledge of subject	5/20	*Essay-specific comments by tutor*
Critical engagement with set texts	3/20	*Essay-specific comments by tutor*
Critical engagement with appropriate independent study	0/20	*Essay-specific comments by tutor*
Quality and structure of argument in response to the question	10/20	*Essay-specific comments by tutor*
Clarity of writing style	8/20	*Essay-specific comments by tutor*
Accuracy in use of scholarly conventions	3/20	*Essay-specific comments by tutor*

Figure 1: Feedback categories

Another possible improvement would be to assess the students in a more flexible or broader way. These should be optional, alternative ways of assessing the students - I'm not saying I would stop using the current academic essay assessment method.

1. A task to write a short piece of creative writing in the style of the author under study. e.g., rewrite a short scene in *Julius Caesar*, write a letter on Lady Montagu's behalf, or write an extra scene in *Persuasion*.

2. Set more precisely defined TMA questions and relate these to our 21st-century experiences. For example:

- What does Shakespeare's Julius Caesar tell us about the fall of politicians such as Thatcher, Blair, Cameron, Johnson and Trump?

- Compare the psychological basis between the mother-son relationship in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and HBO's T*he Sopranos*. Contrast the contemporary audience's view of these studies of human motivation.

These are perhaps rather left-field suggestions though.

I think the TMA/EMA submission process could be clarified as follows:

1. There are confusing and unnecessary differences between the submission process for TMAs and EMAs. A TMA can be submitted multiple times before the deadline, but only strictly speaking if the wrong TMA document was submitted. The tutor can mark the TMA before the deadline, which somewhat undermines the concept of a deadline. This is a poorly designed process. On the other hand, the EMA can be submitted multiple times before the deadline and is only marked after the deadline. Multiple documents describe the submission process, so it is quite challenging for the student to identify and decode the different methods. There are advantages to the student in being able to use multiple submissions. The student can submit a nearly finished draft early and then not worry about getting zero marks by missing the deadline due to some IT or other disaster on the day of the deadline. An early submission also provides a good backup of the document – protecting the unwary student against accidental deletion on their laptop or complete laptop failure. Knowing there is a 'banker' already submitted is a good stress relief technique for the student while they polish the final version of the submission. (On one of the creative writing modules, my tutor would mark stuff very quickly, even if it was submitted before the deadline, so they were mildly irritated if I then changed it and resubmitted it on the final deadline date. Officially I think I could only change it if I had submitted the wrong version - but then, to my mind, I had done just that, as I had thought of some improvements over the previously submitted version.)

2. I would therefore suggest allowing resubmission both for the EMA and TMA, only marking the submissions once the deadline has passed and rationalising and simplifying the following documents accordingly:

    a. The Assessment Handbook section on submitting TMAs
       https://help.open.ac.uk/documents/policies/assessment-handbook

    b. The Help Centre (TMA section) https://help.open.ac.uk/submitting-a-tma

    c. The Help Centre https://help.open.ac.uk/ema-checklist-electronic-submission

   Another area I would consider for improvement (or perhaps extension) is the module scope. A334 and A335 do a good job of what they say on the tin – they provide a comprehensive study of several centuries of English literature in what, as a non-expert, I would imagine is a traditional way. The student's objective is to develop a thorough knowledge of literary history, theory, and criticism and to understand the placing of literature in its social, political, religious, intellectual and cultural context. The modules teach research and analytic skills, logical thinking, presenting an argument and academic writing. I would like the OU also to offer modules that link the study of literature to the practitioner skills associated with literature, i.e., creative writing (prose, short stories, novels, poetry, drama, life writing). How would a study of Hamlet or Dylan Thomas influence my own writing? I would also like to see modules that concentrate on the development of a specific genre rather than looking at a broad historical panorama. For example, I think it would be easy to generate enough material for a 60-credit module on the literature of the crime story. Or the dystopian novel. Or American poetry. Or LGBT representation. I imagine the problem is – does the OU have enough resources to generate a richer and more complex range of English Literature modules? I guess I'm speculating here rather than making a specific, concrete suggestion.

Conclusion

I was an enthusiastic supporter of the OU at its inception. It was innovative, inclusive, exciting and broke new ground. Since then, I have been a student at brick universities in the 70s and then returned to be an OU student in the 80/90s and 2010/20s. I still am an enthusiastic supporter today, but I do worry that the OU is now losing ground as the brick universities and other organisations become increasingly agile at embracing the technology for remote teaching. At the same time, the OU seems, at least from my student perspective, relatively slow on its feet in adapting to changes. Having said that, I still plan to do A335 next year. Probably.

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Appendix B – The Conventions of Scholarly Writing

An essay written in a scholarly style must include the following elements:

- A thesis or premise or proposition - the development of a perspective of a topic, rather than just a summary of facts. An interpretation of those facts to support a particular view of that topic which comes to a clearly stated conclusion
- An academic voice - the essay must be written using a clear, consistent formal style using formal word choice and tone, objective phrasing, and concise but not repetitive sentence structure. While the writing should not be dry, it should focus on clarity and economy of expression.
- Formal organization and presentation of ideas. The essay must use a strong paragraph structure including
    - An introductory paragraph containing a thesis statement that introduces the topic of the essay
    - Paragraphs that support with evidence and and analysis and a conclusion. Each paragraph supports one explores the arguments and evidence that supports the thesis statement with both evidence and analysis. One way of thinking about body paragraphs in scholarly writing is the MEAL plan:
        - **Main Idea:** Your topic sentence stating the concrete claim the paragraph is advancing.
        - **Evidence:** Paraphrase or direct quotations from the source material you are using to support your topic sentence's claim. **Analysis:** Your explanation and evaluation of the evidence; explaining the evidence you provided and its relevance in your own words
        - **Lead Out:** Concluding; preparing your reader to transition to the next paragraph (and the next claim). The MEAL plan matches the general format of academic writing on many levels: that of assertion, evidence, and explanation. Many students make the mistake of writing toward a topic sentence or claim, rather than from one; keeping the MEAL plan in mind as you write will help you begin your paragraphs strongly and develop your analysis thoroughly. (
        Extracted from: Duke University Thompson Writing Program. (n.d.)).
    - A concluding paragraph which briefly recapitulates the essay main points and states if the thesis has been demonstrated or not.
- Cited evidence and critical and logical analysis. The arguments in the essay must be supported by scholarly sources, which are generally peer-reviewed articles, books, and journals. As an academic writer, you should express your own personal views, but these must be supported either by specific evidence from relevant recognised scholarly resources or by evidence based on close reading of the text under analysis.
- Citations must be accompanied by a reference list and should be expressed in the specified house style (OU Harvard for the Open University).

A good scholarly essay will

- Easily identify your thoughts and ideas on a subject and distinguish these from the thoughts and ideas of others.
- Express and analysis the relationship between ideas rather than simply making a sequence of factual statements that the reader has to interpret themselves

- Avoid personal bias
- Take a balanced view of the topic
- Be objective
- Be formal in tone and impersonal in style
- Avoid contractions or shortened forms of verbs, such as won't, doesn't or it's
- Avoid personal pronouns such as I, me, you, your. On the other hand, It's arguable that, given that you are encouraged to think for yourself, interpret texts, and develop an argument in your essay, it makes sense to use the first person. If you do use it though, ensure that views or opinions are backed up by evidence and reference to critics.
- May use the passive form of verbs
- Avoid verbs that are composed of multiple words, such as 'give up', 'put up with'
- Tend to employ a cautious way of explaining findings, using expressions such as 'may', 'it is possible that...', 'could'
- May use specialised vocabulary.
- Contain citations and an accompanying reference list expressed in the appropriate house style (OU Harvard for the Open University).

Useful resources for scholarly writing:

Open University, (2022a) 'Developing academic English' in the *Open University Help Centre, Core Skills: Study Skills*, Available at: https://help.open.ac.uk/develop-your-writing (Accessed: 23 Jul 2022).

Open University, (2022b) 'Critical Thinking and writing (Advanced), '*The Student Hub*, Open University, Available at: **https://studenthublive.open.ac.uk/content/critical-thinking-and-writing-advanced-12-jul-2022**

Open University, (2022c) 'Types of Assignment', *Open University Help Centre, Assignments: Types of assignment,* Available at https://help.open.ac.uk/essays

Open University, (2022d) 'Types of Assignment', *Open University Help Centre, Assignments: Writing in your own words,* Available at https://help.open.ac.uk/writing-in-your-own-words

Useful resources for close reading:

There are some very short examples at:

Open University, (2022e) ' Don't describe—analyse', *Undergraduate arts and humanities: Skills: Skills toolkits: English Literature Toolkit.* Available at https://learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=1859527&section=2.2

and of course, there are a lot of close reading examples in the A334 module materials and tutorial material.

Appendix C – just for fun

Just for fun, if there had been a creative writing element in the module, here are some examples of what I would have produced:

A nod to the Spenserian stanza:

> The melted heart
>
> When Jan'ry's chill brought glistening fields of ice
> and February laid down carpets deep of snow,
> a frozen man we made, a bower to our bliss,
> with carrot nose and buttons of the blackest coal.
> Oh, purest body, how we loved our toil.
> Our hearts besought you Snowman, will you stay?
> But, soon friends part; Then whither goes your soul
> when March's rays so kiss the snow away?
> Then dog, in loss, did wail and pant, and ate the carrot anyway.

A nod to the Shakespearean sonnet:

> The Mismaze[1]
>
> While fields submit to winter's white campaign,
> and clouds kiss and bruise the hills with grey,
> the wind pins the sky to earth's window frame
> and I flee the town to climb my favourite way.
> Atop the hill the hard and frosty sward
> is cut by dark and winding lines. I ask what strange,
> mad maze is this, with only but a single path?
> No answer comes, just winter's wind's refrain.
> You could not know whose feet would trace your craft.
> But now my steps between the frigid turf
> decode your labyrinthine cryptograph
> and bring me to the centre of your work.
> And though you're gone, I still remain a mourner
> To your death below, in cold and tender water.

In writing these pieces I felt I learnt quite a lot about the original author's methods and works (without directly emulating them). I had to do some close reading to understand their metrical style, the poetic form and the use of language. So, to me, this is an valuable alternative study technique that can be used in addition to critical analysis or simply close reading.

And finally, a thank you to the Open University, in no particular set text style:

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[1] https://www.worldwidewriter.co.uk/st-catherines-mizmaze-winchester.html

Far Flung Knowledge

After the pub, we eat curry and watch
oddly dressed figures from an exotic academe.
Enrobed in their Levis and 70's wild hair
they dance behind the dust on the TV screen.

We see the thoughts of Euler and Gauss,
appear as lists of poker faced glyphs
and slowly digest long pondered lemmas
delivered to us via the spells of UHF.

Many years later, the cathode has cooled.
Some memories remain, but mostly they're gone.
The magical echoes of those broadcast thoughts
have faded like the snap of an old popadom.

VHS has departed, as have the folks with wild hair.
But with the theorems they taught, their students propound
the communication protocols
that now keep us net bound.

We no longer embrace in the rooms where we met
and Google is now god in our church of the Web.
But teachers still teach and poets still speak
though sadly I'm now too old for curry before bed.