Reflections on A335 – English Literature In Transition - 1800 to the present

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In this note, I will discuss:

- my general experience of the Open University Module A335 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 A335 experience compared to the other OU modules that I have completed,
- how my OU experience compared to some of the graduate remote learning environments I have participated in,
- what could be done to improve the module?

How did I come to A335?

I retired in 2019 after a career in software engineering and decided I would like to study some of the Arts/Humanities subjects I had enjoyed at school but never had time to do while pursuing my career. 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 since I got a distinction (possibly assisted by some academic generosity as this was the start of the pandemic) I applied to do Creative Writing MA at Manchester Metropolitan. They took a while to consider my application (it was the height of the pandemic) so I ended up registering for the OU *A363 Advanced Creative Writing* module just so I was sure to have something to study that year. In fact, It turned out I was accepted at MMU but only in late September, so I ended up doing both the Creative Writing MA in parallel with *A363*. Having got that far with the OU I thought then why not do *A334 English Literature (1500-1815)* and *A335 Literature in*

Transition: 1800 to the present, completing all of these courses in 2023. This meant of course I had not done any first or second undergraduate level English Literature courses.

My overall reaction to A335

I enjoyed reading the texts in *A335*, but I really disliked the TMAs. (I had a similar reaction to *A334*). I felt that the TMA questions were unnecessarily opaque and were more concerned with placing the texts in the social, political, economic and gender politics, philosophy of the historical era of the writer rather than focussing on the literary techniques, themes and writing craft within the works. Maybe that says more about my assumptions of what the study of English Literature is about than the modules themselves. I felt I learnt much more about issues of colonialism, nationalism, racism, social change, class conflict, religion, patriarchy and oppression of one form or another rather than plotting, pacing, characterisation, voice, tone, dialogue and so on. I also felt I spent a huge amount of time searching for secondary sources and discarding those that were irrelevant, rather than focusing on just a few key elements of the critical canon. While I understand the need for an emphasis on independent research at level 3 and developing the skills to select, analyse and evaluate secondary sources I felt the amount of time I spent searching for suitable secondary sources for the TMAs was much too high a proportion of the course, and perhaps reflective of the sort of thing you might do for a postgraduate dissertation.

For me, the course did not place enough emphasis on analysing and evaluating the structure of the texts and the actual writing craft used by the authors. That is to say, I don't think issues of pacing, emotional distance, characterisation, point of view, authorial tone, vocabulary, syntax etc were given enough prominence in the course. Indeed, I got the impression that it would be perfectly possible to get very good marks in the TMAs without even actually reading the text under study and just looking to see what the critics thought of the text. I also remained rather unsure whether the course was intended to use the set texts to explore our own modern, experience, morals, religious or societal behaviour or whether we should set aside our one personal and emotional responses to the texts. I was left thinking: 'If the study of literature is not done at least partly in the context of our own personal lives, then is there then value in studying literature academically rather than just reading literature as a non-academic reader?

- The module did foreground several literary theories: realism, modernism, post-modernism feminism, postcolonialism, and more but I found the presentation of these was somewhat 'ad hoc'. I therefore found it difficult to assemble a complete picture of the many different literary movements and schools within the period under study. For example, movements like the Theatre of the Absurd, The Beat Poets, Concrete Poetry, The Imagists, Science Fiction, Magical Realism and many others were not discussed – are they important? Are they relevant today? Or was there just not room in the course for all these movements? I also did not think that the course went into the various schools of Literary Criticism in any great detail (e.g., Sociological, Psychoanalytical, Formal, New, New Historicism, Structural/Semiotics, Deconstruction, Feminism, Post-colonialism Criticism). Since the course focussed strongly on the use of secondary critical sources, I wondered if it would have been helpful to have actually studied the difference between these critical approaches in more detail. In particular, maybe it would be useful if reading the following texts was a pre-requisite of both *A334* and *A335* course:

Eagleton, T., *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2008, anniversary edn.)

- Rivkin, J. and Ryan, M., ed: *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2nd ed.)

It is perhaps interesting to note that undergraduate courses specifically on Literary Criticism are offered as part of the Arts and Humanities curriculum (Oxford University 2023a, Cambridge University 2023).

The collaborative exercise in *A335* seemed completely inappropriately named I'm afraid. At least in my group it did not involve any genuine collaboration as there was no actual interactive discussion relating to the texts between the group members during this exercise. Each member of the group simply did their part of the exercise, and then stood back and watched the other members do their part. So, if the objective of the exercise was to how to actively work in a team, then it certainly did not achieve that objective.

I felt the Digital Literature chapter felt a little superficial, and perhaps deserved more attention given its contemporary significance. I appreciate that is difficult though given the breadth of the course material. Perhaps if there were optional parallel paths in the module then there would be room for things like discussion of literature in the context of computer gaming, interactive literature where the reader or audience participates in an active way to influence the content of the literature work (perhaps by selecting decision paths and outcomes for the characters, the use of virtual reality environments for the delivery of a work of a literature to the consumer, the concerns raised by the generation of works of literature by Artificial Intelligence or other non-human based methodologies and so on. Digital tools and methods, including text analysis, data visualization, and digital storytelling offer interesting new ways of interpreting literary texts, for example in terms of automated linguistic analysis and this might also have been an interesting option to offer in the module. This is a very fast-moving area, so it is of course difficult to keep completely up to date.

There were two day schools (in person, face to face) – I thought these were really valuable, enjoyable and useful.

I liked the option to consider works outside the set text list in two of the TMAs – I chose to contrast Samuel Beckett's *All That Fall* with Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* and to write about the different modes of oppression in Jumpah Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* and Helen Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching*. I felt the option to bring in works from outside the course set text list enabled me to show that I could do real independent research – in the sense of selecting texts that would provide a sensible vehicle for foregrounding the themes and ideas that had been presented in the module.

Generally, I found *A335* a lonely experience. Peer-to-peer interaction was virtually non-existent. The *A335* Forums for the course were sparsely used, and there were no face-to-face tutor groups this year. This was also true in *A334*, but slightly less so, in the creative writing modules I had studied in previous years. (This is a strong contrast to studies in English Literature and Creative Writing I have undertaken remotely at other Universities (Oxford 2021, 2022 and Manchester Metropolitan 2019-2023)).

Course Scope

It is undoubtedly a huge challenge to cover the enormous range of literary texts across the period covered by *A335*. The module concentrates largely on mainstream prose, poetry and drama which perhaps be recognised as of high aesthetic value. Many genres of literature are not covered, e.g., for example: Prose genres such as Crime (e.g., Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler, Ian Rankin), Romance, Thriller (Le Carré), Science Fiction (Asimov, J.G. Ballard), Dystopian (Margaret Atwood), Satire (Martin Amis), Memoire (Laurie Lee) and Children's Literature (Roald Dahl). In some cases, these are more commercial or populist, but they are still interesting texts that reflection the transitional nature of literature and society. Many schools of poetry were not covered, e.g., the Imagists, the Beat Poets, Concrete poetry, The Movement, the Language Poets, and the British Poetry Revival are just a few that represent the rich and exotic variations in poetic approach in the last century. Similarly, the module only has space to consider a couple of dramatists and omits such key figures as Ibsen, Beckett, Pinter, and Carol Churchill.

To be fair, there is only so much material that can be covered in a 60 credit module (and *A335* is already completely full!), but I had hoped that completing A334/A335 would give me a fairly exhaustive appreciation of all forms of Literature. That, as turned it, was a rather optimistic (and indeed probably naïve) viewpoint. I'm not sure that even if I now took the second year literature modules that would by any means fill in the gaps, as there are also things like TV plays and cinematic film script, graphic novel and podcasts and other modern forms that should also perhaps now be considered as may seem somewhat peripheral modern literature. I imagine there is also a place for the consideration of issues of translation (both in language and in delivery media (e.g., turning books into plays). These are perhaps important issues in today's multicultural societies and multi-media environments but again there is not room for this in the current modules.

Having said all that, given the wide scope of the module, I do not really see how much more could have been fitted in. (Having seen the new English Literature MA content, I think that course provides a wonderfully rich and diverse range of material, but it is of course at postgraduate level. It would be really great (though no doubt very costly) to provide similar richness in the undergraduate modules.

Course materials

I thought the *A335* course materials were good as far as they went, but they did not go as far as I wanted them too. The module books seemed to me to be fairly high-level discussions of certain aspects of each text rather than detailed, comprehensive textbooks. This pushes the onus onto the student to search for the appropriate teaching material outside the module books. It is certainly reasonable to expect the student to do some research at level 3 undergraduate level however I felt there was far too little specific guidance as to what material to study. Areas that I think could have been covered better were:

1. There is no course material that discusses the various schools of Literary Criticism or even the general principles of Literary Criticism and how the methods of Literary Criticism changed during the two centuries covered by the module.

2. Types of literary devices and the theory of narrative form, narrative voice, point of view, dialogue, pacing, structural form etc was not discussed in any systematic way. Much of this material would not be uniquely specific to the period of literature studied in the module, and would be common to say *A230, A334, A335* etc. Maybe therefore there ought to be a base module on literary criticism that is a required pre-requisite or co-requisite for *A335* however I guess that would be difficult to fit into the current module structure.

I found the self-study exercises in the module books useful, particularly as worked answers were provided – since these allowed me to evaluate how well I was understanding the concepts presented by comparing my answer to the one provided.

I loved having access to the OU library. The librarians were also super helpful. I was surprised by 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.

The TMAs

I would estimate that 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 the 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.

I appreciated the very detailed feedback I received on my assignments. I found it fair, accurate and helpful. I still remain somewhat unsure though what actually makes an exemplary answer – I feel it really would be helpful to have some examples of high quality specimen answers to show just what is required.

The rules for late submission of TMA and EMAs seem unnecessarily complex and even contradictory regarding the grace period. The Arts and Humanities Assessment Guide says:

> *3. Submitting TMAs*
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> *TMAs should be submitted by noon on the cut-off date stipulated in your module's Study Planner. Tutors are not required to mark assignments that have been submitted late without permission. It is very important, therefore, that you contact your tutor well before the cut-off date if you think that you will not be able to submit an assignment on time.*

However, the Assessment Handbook says:

> *If you are submitting your TMA online, you should ensure that you submit well before the midday deadline (UK local time) on the cut-off date in case you experience technical problems. However, there is a 12-hour grace period so any TMAs received before midnight on the cut-off date will still be accepted. We strongly recommend that you do not leave electronic*

So, the two statements are inconsistent - the first insists on submission by noon, without pre-arrangement, and the second allows a 12-hour grace period, without prior notification. And the arrangements for the EMA are slightly different, as shown below.   This complexity just adds to many students' confusion (and stress levels).

The EMA Assessment Guide says:

> *3.2.1. An EMA submitted up to 24 hours after the end of the grace period (00:00 hrs to 23:59 hrs on the day after the cut-off), i.e., in the 24-hour penalty period, it will be accepted for marking with a deduction of up to 10 percentage points as a mark penalty for late submission.*

On the four modules I have done (*A215, A363, A334,* and *A335*) there has always been a grace period between noon and midnight on the deadline day for TMAs. But there was no 24 grace period after midnight. All of which was confusing.

   I found the TMA (and EMA) questions irritatingly opaque, in the sense that it was hard to identify precisely what the proposition was that the examiners wanted the student to discuss and also it was difficult to decide which aspects of the set texts I should discuss and what arguments I should present to address that proposition 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.

   I still don't think I properly understand what exactly is required in an essay that would receive a pass 1 level mark (85-100). The following table shows the difference between the pass 1 and pass 2 criteria:

	85–100 (Pass 1, 'A' range)	70–84 (Pass 2, 'B' range)
Knowledge of texts:	You made an excellent choice of texts and in discussion foregrounded their 'literary' qualities. You demonstrated a detailed knowledge of your chosen texts and the critical debates relevant to them.	You made a good choice of texts for discussion and demonstrated knowledge of these in terms of that content and their literary qualities through apt citation and quotation.
Presentation and scholarly methods:	Argument and evidence were well woven together, and you made consistent use of literary terms. You quoted accurately and provided clear references to print and online material.	Your essay was made up of fluent sentences, well organised into paragraphs. You probably made some use of literary terms and provided clear references to print and online material.

Argument and response to assignment:	Your argument was well controlled and organised and addressed all parts of the topic. Perhaps you used your own insights to extend the argument beyond the terms of the set topic	Your essay addressed the issues raised in the assignment thoroughly and in a way that showed you were clearly thinking for yourself. Your argument showed evidence of your having reflected on the topic.
Understanding of the issues:	You clearly understood the issues raised by the assignment and the relevant study material, including seeing why these were important in terms of literary study. When required to do so, you showed solid evidence of independent study and an impressive grasp of the independent study materials you had read outside of the directed teaching provided.	Your essay addressed the issues raised in the assignment thoroughly and in a way that showed you were clearly thinking for yourself. Your argument showed evidence of your having reflected on the topic.

(Open University, 2023)

The differences between the two levels seem rather subjective to me. I'm not sure that using conditionality as in 'You probably made some use of literary terms and provided clear references to print and online material" is very helpful to the student. This provokes the question "Does the student need to use literary terms or not?" at this level? The guidance is unclear.

The criteria suggest that better marks can be obtained by an 'excellent choice of texts ' rather than a ' good choice of texts ' or, when considering the texts, by 'foregrounded their 'literary' qualities' instead of 'demonstrated knowledge of these in terms of that content and their literary qualities' and so on. While I can see there is a difference between 'excellent' and 'good' I don't know what this distinction would be in quantitative or explicit terms. It seems that a pure value judgement would be made in this case by the tutor as to what is 'excellent' and what is 'good'. That in one sense is fair enough, the tutor is the expert after all. But from a student's point of view, I remain bemused. The module does not provide actual sample examples that show the difference between 'excellent' and 'good' so I feel somewhat unsure what I'm aiming for. Of course, the tutor will give feedback, which would indicate if they thought the essay was 'excellent' or just 'good' but, despite the earnest attempts of the tutors, I have not found this feedback very easy to translate into a clear distinction between what is 'excellent' and what is 'good'. As to the difference between 'foregrounded their 'literary' qualities' and 'demonstrated knowledge of these in terms of that content and their literary qualities' these phrases seem pretty equivalent to me, so do not help, at least in my mind, in differentiation pass 1 and pass 2.

I'm sure the difficulties I have discussed above are not just limited to myself, or indeed *A335*. Providing crystal clear, quantitative, unambiguous marking criteria for any Arts and Humanities subject must however be difficult, because of the nature of the subject.

I think the underlying point I'm trying to make is: I have found it very difficult in *A334/A335* (and in other literary courses) to understand how to improve the intellectual

content of my literary essays. As evidence, my marks in *A334* and *A335* are pretty constant, independent of the increasing effort and care I have put into each essay. This was a major frustration for me, and one I don't really see how to resolve.

I'm not sure how to resolve the issues mentioned here. Maybe a numerical marking system is not appropriate for an English Literature course. Certainly, though, I think it would help significantly if the OU provided example annotated essays that showed the difference between the various pass levels. Or published the top EMA answers each year.

Did I enjoy it?

No, not really, I'm afraid. But I'm glad I took the module, as it gave me a broad perspective of the period and introduced me to several new authors.

I felt both modules were heavily weighted towards the analysis and writing of Literature Criticism rather than other aspects of literature rather than a more craft-orientated analysis of the texts. The TMAs focussed much more on relating the texts in their political, social and historical contexts rather than a detailed examination of the writing techniques used to construct the works.   Maybe though that is the definition of English Literature. I had hoped for more focus (though there definitely is some) on the mechanics of writing literature (i.e., literary devices, plot, pacing, experimental forms, tempo, tone, characterisation and so on), rather than a detailed examination of the thematic and societal concerns of each work. I also felt that the module took a rather establishment view focusing on the (admittedly important) effects of imperialism, colonialism and patriarchy. There was little consideration of say the Socialist or Marxist authors, the LGBTQ community, the disabled author's voice or the more extreme avant-garde.

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 for TMA3), and then they stopped altogether. Relatively few people attended the tutorials (maybe 25-50% 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 *A335*. 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. 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.

There are of course students who find studying as an individual without peer interaction more suited to their circumstances. 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, it maybe would be a bad thing for these students to make peer interaction mandatory. This also is true at on-campus universities too.

It could be argued that the OU is a remote learning organisation and should be 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.

While I felt the tutors put a great deal of effort into both the tutor group tutorials and the more general subject matter tutorials, I was far from convinced this was the optimal use of resources. The tutor group tutorials often focussed on helpful preparation for TMA or EMA questions. So, if there are say 200 students and 10 tutors (these are just estimates), then each of the ten tutors will prepare and present the same information. This is substantial duplication of effort. Wouldn't it be more efficient to have just one tutor concentrate on TMA/EMA preparation for each essay and present it to all the students at the same time? Or even better prepare a video presentation that can be viewed by the students at their convenience, and then allow students to follow up with questions at their tutor group tutorial. This seems to have been partly the case, at least informally on the E302 course (Open University, 2019), where commonly useful videos are shared on YouTube.

Perhaps more importantly though, I feel the OU should change the approach for subject matter tutorials (by which I mean tutorials that relate to a particular author or text). For example, there were three separate 90-minute tutorials on Eliot, Woolf and Rhys). Would it not be better to remove this duplication and prepare video lectures on the material covered by such tutorials and record it once when the course is first released? This material can then be re-used over the lifetime of the course, freeing up tutorial time during the course for more interactive teaching – including answering questions directly from the students about the video lectures. Having pre-recorded lectures also helps very much with the issue that not all students can attend the online tutorials, at the times they are presented. (This is the approach used by some other institutions (Universities (Oxford, 2021, 2022) and described in detail in *Comparing A335 to other courses* below).

One of the things that seemed strange to me was that the OU seems to actively discourage discussion of the course material between students. (Note: I am not suggesting that students should copy each other's work, but I think they certainly should be able to debate the course content and the meaning of the questions asked during the course). This discouragement of student interaction I think is partly a consequence of the guidance given in the Academic Conduct Policy (Open University, 2021)

> *3.3.3 Working together with other students on a piece of work that will be submitted for individual assessment is not permitted and can lead to all the students involved being investigated for academic misconduct.*

3.4.4 Discussing the material and ideas you are learning with your tutor and other students is beneficial and is encouraged. However, when you start to write your assignment you must make sure this is entirely your own work and you should not share it with other students.

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)

The concern here is that students may submit the same opinions in their coursework.

I don't understand the rationale behind this (though of course I remain fundamentally against plagiarism). If you have a discussion at a campus university with a couple of friends in a coffee bar over whether or not Hamlet did go to heaven, then no one would expect not to be able to use that material from that discussion in an essay. You might need to provide a reference to that discussion and name the participants, but then that is no different if say if you happened to sit next to Simon Sharma on a train journey and had a discussion with him about Hamlet's potentially sinful actions. Perhaps more realistically, if I have an undergraduate friend who is also studying English Literature but at say Durham University, am I allowed to discuss a common set text with them and use material from that discussion (with attribution) in an TMA answer? Why would that be any different if that friend happened to an OU student? It seems to me that the OU should be encouraging student debate rather than suppressing it, while still being strong in discouraging plagiarism when submitting essays. That means that students should be referencing any source that they use, including their own student discussions, and not avoiding such discussions entirely.

In other literary courses I have taken, I have found that student discussion is strongly encouraged, and indeed has often been a central feature of the course (Oxford University 2022, 2023b, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2023, Modpo, 2022). I felt on those courses that such discussion added greatly to the richness and depth of the learning experience.

In some ways, I felt my OU experience was more of a correspondence course than the multi-layered experience that might be associated with a traditional 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 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? This might take the form of a panel discussion with say five course tutors, or prominent academics from outside the OU, with a moderator and curated questions from the student audience.

It would be beneficial to know when an assignment is 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 many marks were 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? I can understand this would be extraordinary difficult for the tutors though. What would be useful would be for the module to include some example answers to realistic TMA questions, annotated to show why they are high-quality answers. It seems entirely absurd to me that there are no sample answers for *A334/A335* – one reason I was told was that "I have worked at one institution that did give specimen answers and it definitely meant that most students tended to adopt the same "tone" and relied too heavily on them" part of the reason and also it has been suggested to me that students would simply copy the sample answers. Maybe a different approach would be to set questions in a way that material from previous years could not be used directly in the following years' answers. Other universities seem to take a different view and do give samples of previous students' submissions (e.g., Manchester Metropolitan University, 2023).

Comparing A335 to other courses

I have done a couple of twelve-week, year-one underaduate English Literature courses remotely from the Oxford University Continuing Education Department (Oxford University 2022, 2023). These used a completely different methodology than the OU. There were no module books. Instead, the tutor provided an online 1-hour lecture on the set text(s) for that week and a list of secondary critical sources to review and then the tutor group came together for a 1-hour tutor lead discussion in which all the students participated, though of course some more than others. There was an online forum for ongoing interaction between the students too. So, there were about 22 hours of face-to-face teaching, in a very Socratic and supportively inclusive environment, compared to the largely didactic OU approach. The course was valued at 10 CATs points at FHEQ level 4. Assessment was done by a 500-word close reading submission and a 1500-word essay at the end of the course. The course cost was about 450£, which is comparable to the OU module fees.

I felt these courses had several advantages over the OU methodology:

- There were more opportunities to discuss aspects of the texts that were of personal interest to the students – i.e., there was more flexibility in the material presented in the course.
- There were plenty of opportunities for the students to ask the tutor questions directly and get answers in real-time, and even then, enter into a short debate about those answers. In the OU, whether by email or phone, the time taken for a sequence of related questions and answers is just too long to be practically useful.
- The students were able to interact and discuss stuff outside the tutorials – there were no restrictions on what material the students could discuss – and indeed debating and learning from others was positively encouraged.
- For the final essay, the student chose their own proposition/thesis/question (with the tutor's approval). So, each student answered a different academically orientated question – thus reducing the possibility of students sharing answers but also increasing the interest level for both student and tutor.

What improvements could be made?

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

1. Move away from away from the model of student interaction that prevents peer to peer discussion and debate and change to one that positively encourages it. This would involve modifying the teaching model to include more face-to-face teaching and discussion using web conference technology. This could be done by preparing more pre-recorded tutorial lectures at the start of the course to allow the re-use of such material throughout the lifetime of the course, thus freeing tutor hours for more interactive teaching.

2. I also think the implementation of 'office hours' would be beneficial. The implementation I have in mind would be to make one or more 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.

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

   a. 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.

   b. 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.

4. Be more helpful and generous in the wording of TMA questions and avoid obscure and ambiguous wording.   For example, instead of 'discuss the anarchy of desire' use 'discuss how sexual desire results in a loss of conscious control' or a 'site of national historic formation' use 'an accumulated repository of valuable information reflecting the state of society at that time'.

5. It is quite hard to find a simple and comprehensive format specification in the course materials for the layout of the TMA/EMA. This could be done in a single sentence and thus is short enough to be included in each TMA rubric or guidance and would stop students repeatedly asking about the format on Forums and Facebook. For example:

   A Word document using double spacing (except for poetry and block quotations which should be single-spaced), 1-inch margins, Times New Roman 12 font, the first line of second and subsequent paragraphs should be indented in each section and using the OU version of Harvard referencing style.

6. Simplify and make consistent the rules for the deadline for TMAs and EMAs. I would simply say:

   The deadline for submission is midnight on the day given in the assessment brief. (It is recommended you submit several hours before this to allow for possible IT issues). Late submissions up to 24 hours past the deadline will be permitted but will result in an automatic deduction of 10% of your mark. Submission later than this will require submission of an exceptional circumstances request, which must be made before the deadline.

   Put these requirements (or whatever you choose) in a single place and do not spread them across multiple documents – at present they are spread across:

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

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

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

   and maybe others. If different documents need to present the submission rules, then put a cross reference in all but one of the documents, so there is only one place that is the master list of requirements.

- Consider making the following texts a pre-requisite of both *A334* and *A335*:

  o Eagleton, T., *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell, Oxford,1996, 2nd Edn or 2008, anniversary edn.)
  o Rivkin, J. and Ryan, M., ed: *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2nd ed.)

  and/or including a specific section in the module on the theory and practice of literary criticism.

Other possible improvements

1. I have attended tutorials given by many different OU tutors and lecturers. Rarely though does the presenter give any information about their background or how their knowledge and interests relate to the material they are presenting. This always seems odd to me, as it seems a basic element of making a presentation to an audience that the presenter should make available their qualifications to present the material, at least in an informal way. At public lectures this is often done by providing a short biographical summary when the lecture is advertised so is not needed during the event. But the OU does not provide biographical or professional CVs for its tutors and staff as far as I can see. Quite a few of the tutors seem to have a very sparse online presence. A small thing, but again something that seems slightly peculiarly specific to the OU.

   Recommendation: Tutors should introduce themselves and briefly describe their academic background and interests.

2. I think the contract between the student and their particular tutor is not very well specified. How much interaction is allowed and what topics are in scope? Is there a limit to the amount of time a tutor may give to an individual student? Does the tutor have a duty to reply to student queries within a certain time?

   For example, how much individual tutor time is supposed to be available to each student? I could easily have sent my tutor 50 emails with various questions, comments about the set texts, the difficulties of pinning down exactly what the definition is of a post-modern text or whether Philip Larkin should not be read because of his misogyny, etc. I did not do this because it would have exhausted both of us as it just takes too long to have a discussion effectively by email. I'm not even sure such questions are within the module scope. No doubt other students take differing approaches. But while I find the OU tutors very willing to offer their help, actually accessing that help can often be time-consuming and not very effective.

   At other universities, a particular quota of face-to-face time was allocated for a given course. E.g., you might be expected to take up to five 15-minute (or two 30 minute and one 15-minute) tutorials for a given 30 credit course. This set a level of expectation and encouraged students to spend their allocation efficiently. If further time was needed, this was also available, provided there was good reasons to do so.

   Recommendation: The terms of the bidirectional 'contract' between student and tutor should be spelt out more explicitly at the start of the course.

3. There have been quite a few comments on social media from students who have had their EMA results held back because of possible plagiarism. While the reasons for this is unclear, it seems like the OU is using automatic tools like Turnitin to detect plagiarism, but then sending a rather vaguely worded email saying the EMA result won't be available for a substantial period (up to 6 weeks) while an investigation

takes place.   This seems a poor way to handle this situation as it has clearly caused considerable student angst (e.g., Beck, 2023). At another university, a Turnitin report was run at the point in time the student made a course work submission, and the report made available to the student. This made it very clear to both student and tutor if there was a potential plagiarism issue and gave the student the opportunity to fix it. (Of course, it might be argued that this actually encourages those who choose to deliberately plagiarise as it helps the student defeat the checks by showing what parts of the submission need reworking – however as there are numerous inexpensive plagiarism checkers online this option is available to the student anyway)

Recommendation: Run Turnitin at the time of student submission and make the report immediately available to the student.

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 studying Management and in 2019-23 studying Creative Writing and English Literature. I still am an enthusiastic supporter today, but I do worry that the OU is now losing ground to brick universities and other organisations as they become increasingly agile and effective at embracing the technology for remote teaching. The OU seems, at least from my student perspective, relatively slow on its feet in adapting to change[1].

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[1] Perhaps though, my fears are unfounded – it seems that quite radical changes are planned within the Open University: 'The governing council at the Open University has agreed to start work on a case for a multi-million-pound relocation from its current site to a new space adjacent to Milton Keynes Central Station. A proposal is also being developed for a new 'sister university' which will allow students to study with the Open University in person, supported by teaching on site and a range of accommodation, entertainment and sport offers at the heart of the city.'

https://www.mkfm.com/news/local-news/milton-keynes-could-get-new-city-centre-university-as-ou-prepares-multi-million-pound-relocation-proposals/?fbclid=IwAR2M8XTseKW0lj0Sqom2hs2mWvRx0naL8yHy1MtG_FPue9-b6fMid4iMAa8

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