
Authenticity, Validity and Reliability in A-level English Literature

JOHN HODGSON

ABSTRACT This article discusses the use of assessment by teachers to replace external marking. It shows how professional participation and moderation can provide reliability in summative assessment, even in public examinations for older students. It draws on historical experiences of assessment for A-level English literature.

Introduction

In 1993, a UK government move to reduce coursework assessment in national examinations attenuated an A-level course in English literature. The AQA A-level English literature qualification (Syllabus 660) had for fifteen years embraced pedagogic and assessment practices intended to promote student reading and thinking rather than the rehearsal of received opinion. These included an open-book examination, where candidates could take annotated copies of texts into the examination hall, and an opportunity for students to write a number of 'critical' and 'creative' assignments that were assessed by the candidates' teachers and moderated by the assessment authority. Despite – or possibly because of – a developed system of coursework moderation overseen by the assessment body, the course was regarded as beyond government control, and by 2000 (the Curriculum 2000 reform) it had been truncated without consultation and almost beyond recognition.

To reflect at this point in history on the values and practices of a past A-level English literature course may seem a nostalgic indulgence; yet the course stays in the memory of many English teachers as a touchstone of quality as well as of innovation. It achieved a high degree of both validity and reliability in assessing the study of English literature. The design and structure of the course and its assessment arrangements (which involved local moderators employed by the assessment organisation) gave students opportunities to show an authentic personal response to their reading and capability in studying and writing in a

range of literary styles and genres. It provided little motive or opportunity for student malpractice, and engaged teachers regionally and nationally in a developed professional community of practice.

Origins and Originality

AEB Syllabus 753 (as the course was originally known) started in 1977, the first examination being held in 1979 (it was a two-year course). Its early development coincided with the opening years of Margaret Thatcher's premiership, when Keith Joseph was education secretary: A-level English literature flourished as a result of the deregulation of the UK assessment market. The course was called 'alternative' (the word was even printed on the exam papers), but it wasn't the first to introduce alternative elements. However, it was the first truly integrated alternative to other syllabuses. According to Bill Greenwell, whose tertiary college in Exeter was one of the first to adopt the syllabus, this was largely due to Peter Buckroyd, the chief examiner, who had a vision of the whole enterprise. Not only did 753 offer coursework (initially a third of the assessment); it also had two open-book papers, one of them also containing practical criticism (the Shakespeare paper). Students were allowed to bring annotated texts into the examination. These papers initially had a (notional) 'reading time' of 15 minutes (invigilators complained at this flexible extension of the conventional three-hour examination).

Personal Response to Literature

Greenwell's account of Buckroyd's genius is that he grasped that open-book exams needed appropriate questions. Rather than offer candidates merely a conventional question (such as a quotation of critical provenance, with the instruction 'discuss'), Buckroyd's tasks drew attention to a debatable feature of the work and asked clearly and plainly, with prompts, for appropriate answers. Many questions directed candidates to particular pages of the text, and suggested discourse features that the candidate 'might like to consider'. The tasks required candidates to look at detail and to support everything they said by textual reference. The 'unseen' too became an invitation to detailed, considered response. On one occasion, Buckroyd gave each student an edited Beckett piece in a large font, with half a page of prompts. In Greenwell's view, students did well in response to the prompts because Buckroyd legitimised their opinions. They were rewarded for what they knew, and for the textually supported feelings they expressed. This was a practical application of personal response, a feature of the study of English literature that had been central to the subject since its inception.

Coursework and Consortium Assessment

In addition to this 'set text' study, candidates were required to write eight coursework essays of approximately 1000 words on books and tasks chosen in consultation with their teacher. The texts chosen had to cover all literary genres and to include non-fiction, and coursework tasks included opportunities for text transformation (such as pastiche and parody) and original writing. A further 'extended essay' of 3000 words comprised a comparative study of two or more texts linked by author, period or theme. By the late 1980s, 50% of the marks were allocated to coursework, which was guided and assessed by area moderators within country-wide consortia of A-level teachers. In my own area, the participating schools and colleges were spread over South Devon and Cornwall, and some colleagues had to undertake considerable journeys to attend the twice-yearly daylong meetings. The venue was usually provided free by one of the centres, which also provided lunch.

The first meeting of the year, usually early in the spring term, was an in-service training event. This would focus on one or more aspects of the course, such as ways of approaching the chosen set texts, the choice of themes and texts for coursework study, organising and assessing students' oral presentations, and so on. Colleagues reported that these meetings were enjoyable because they offered opportunities for discussion of literature and ideas as well as of pedagogy and assessment. There was usually discussion of suitable coursework assignments, which were seen as a means of student learning as well as of assessment. Student and teacher were encouraged to negotiate the wording of a question, and the approach to be taken. Collaborative study could involve drafting and discussion with classmates and teacher, rather than an isolated effort to read the teacher's mind. The student's coursework folder was intended to be evidence of mastery of a range of texts and genres, including the student's original writing.

The second meeting of the year was given to moderation of candidates' coursework folders. These had been awarded provisional grades by the students' teachers. The majority of teachers attended these meetings, although they were not compelled to do so; schools and colleges could choose to accept the area moderator's assessment of student work without involving their peers in the discussion. Each school or college brought a sample of candidates' folders: these were discussed to indicate the standard to be held to in the succeeding internal moderation. Delegates to the meeting worked in groups, putting the folders in order of merit, and adjusting marks where necessary to ensure a reliable ranking across the consortium. In case of irresolvable dispute or indecision, the area moderator would decide the rank order. Participants seemed to gain satisfaction from being part of the assessment as well as the teaching process, and from having the opportunity to see at first-hand the work of their peers in other centres.

Creative Writing and Extended Essay

Coursework offered opportunities to widen the range of students' writing as well as their reading. Pastiche and parody, for example, allowed the writer to explore the text in a personal, affective way and to write in a creative mode, demonstrating grasp of form, character and theme. Creative assignments discussed in consortium meetings included the use of a minor character in one play as a major one in another (after *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*); an ode, with commentary, after reading Keats; and additional dialogue, in the style of Harold Pinter, as it occurs offstage in *The Caretaker* (Hodgson, 1995; NATE Post-16 Committee, 2004).

The most significant piece of coursework (in terms of allocated marks) was the 'extended' essay, a comparative study of two or more texts normally linked by theme, period or author. The extended essay originally accounted for 11.1% and went on to account for 16.6% of the assessment. In Greenwell's view, this too was a brilliant innovation, for a variety of reasons. It gave the students a chance to do something approaching individual scholarship. Two, usually three, books were studied, usually on a theme. The themes chosen might sometimes have been unexpected in an academic context, but, like the open-book exam questions, they gave students scope to develop their interests and responses. More than one adolescent horse-rider found interest in writing about *Black Beauty*, *St. Mawr*, and poems by Edwin Muir or Ted Hughes. Greenwell remembers more than one student who compared three novels about people with hearing impairment. Students had to read more widely, and so did the staff.

A few examples of extended-essay topics chosen within local consortia are: fathers and daughters in Shakespeare; an evaluation of Hardy's heroines; self-determination in the face of oppression, as portrayed in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Beloved* and the poems of Grace Nichols; a study of children's readings of A.A. Milne and Lewis Carroll; Stephen King's portrayal of small-town America in three novels; and a study of banned and censored literature, focusing on *The Satanic Verses*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Hodgson, 1995; NATE Post-16 Committee, 2004). Students would prepare the work over a number of weeks, overseen by the teacher. The best extended essay in Greenwell's experience (it gained 120/120) compared narrative technique in *At-Swim-Two-Birds*, *Tristram Shandy* and *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* – which started to unpick the form of the extended essay as it went along (the conclusion was in the middle).

Validity and Reliability

The course offered a high degree of validity and reliability in terms of educating candidates' responses to a wide range of literary texts and assessing these accurately. This was achieved first through open-book examinations that, in Greenwell's view, 'killed question-spotting stone dead'. The second guarantor of validity was the coursework component, which was, in Tomlinson's (2004)

terms, 'the work of the course' rather than a single unit of work prepared for internal assessment. Eight of the nine pieces of coursework were simply essays produced as part of ongoing classroom interactions: their validity derived in part from their not being specially worked up for the assessment. Students would normally write more than the required number of essays and would choose the best for their folder. Each essay was worth just over 4% of the total marks for the course, and thus was not a high-stakes assessment. For this reason, and because of the teacher's knowledge of the student's characteristic work, plagiarism and cheating were rare. Moreover, as described above, the consortium system produced a developmental community of practice which ensured a high level of reliable, standardised assessment within and between centres.

Learning from the Past

More than two decades later we can see the widespread deleterious effects of repeated attempts to gain validity and reliability by a retrogressive curriculum externally assessed. The issue here is not only the well-publicised incapacity of the assessment organisations to produce consistently reliable and acceptable results (see e.g. QCA, 2002). More serious, in terms of the validity of student work, is the governmental imposition of a narrow curriculum tied to a system of teacher accountability that breeds inauthentic practices. John Dixon's (1967) 'personal growth' is still the principle of English teaching that gains the allegiance of a majority of practitioners (Goodwyn, 2012), but the pressure on students and teachers to produce 'results' ensures that the extrinsic value of a grade or mark matters more than the intrinsic value of authentic student creation and interpretation. The competitive, individualistic need to achieve a superior grade fuels a multiplicity of websites that will write university (and school) students' essays for them for a fee. Oxbridge Essays (2016), for example, 'offer essays and essay plans, dissertations, presentations, coursework and model exam answers for students at every level of study'.

In the current competitive, individualistic, inauthentic climate of what might be called institutionalised cheating, the AEB/AQA 753/660 English literature A-level course stays in the memory of many English teachers as a touchstone of what validity and reliability might mean in English curriculum and assessment. It gave us control over at least part of the course. It enabled us to choose texts for and with the students, and to encourage students' authentic responses in a variety of genres. It enabled us to learn from colleagues while jointly discussing and assessing our students' work. Most of all, it gave a sense of personal purpose, allowing the talent and creativity of both students and teachers to be authentically validated.

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JOHN HODGSON has taught and researched English studies in secondary and higher education in the UK and overseas. He currently edits the journal *English in Education*. Correspondence: john.hodgson@uwe.ac.uk