

Project: Enhancing the Student Experience of Research-based Learning and Writing

Case Study

Mini-Project Details

Mini-Project Title	Mapping Contemporary Cinema
School / Department	School of Languages, Linguistics and Film
Staff Involved	Dr Guy Westwell

1. Context / background

The mapping contemporary cinema module

- is designed for final year undergraduates in Film Studies at Queen Mary, University of London;
- is centred around a student-run editorial board that identifies, edits and develops work from other (research-based) undergraduate modules in order for the best of that work to be published on a dedicated website and submitted to the undergraduate journal, *Film Matters*. (Students will also write editorials identifying key trends and issues in contemporary cinema in order to provide context for the published work. Each year the published work will form a kind of survey of the contemporary scene in the different national cinemas that Film Studies at Queen Mary specializes in teaching);
- is intended to foster an environment of teamwork and good communication through the management of, and participation in, an editorial board, and through the processes of peer review, revision of other student's work, etc.;
- is intended to be of particular interest to students who might be considering a career in academia, publishing, the film industry, film journalism and so on;
- seeks to find productive ways of engaging with contemporary cinema, in effect directing academic/scholarly work (which tends to take number of years to be formulated) towards current trends and tendencies;
- aims to augment the personal development components of the undergraduate degree by providing clear transferable skills – writing, thinking, editing, working as a team, producing work of a professional standard, clearing copyright, and so on – that can be included on a student's CV and also easily described in interview.

2. Assessment

There are three assessed components to this module:

- Reader's report: the student must select a suitable piece of student work written for one of the feeder modules and produce a reader's report on this piece of work, including a fact check and evaluation of source material, supplementary film analysis where necessary, and suggestions for improvements in content, presentation and written style (25%);
- Rewrite/edit: the student must rewrite the selected piece of student work (see above) following feedback on their reader's report from the module tutor. Students will also be required to write a letter seeking copyright clearance on any images used and evidence of this will also form part of the assessment (25%);
- Editorial: the student will write an article on a particular aspect or issue relating to contemporary cinema, with a particular focus on the intersection of national and transnational trends and an engagement with relevant theory (50%).

3. Research-based learning rationale

Although on the Mapping Contemporary Cinema module students are writing up the research that has been conducted by students on other research-based modules, this still activates a research-based approach and encourages them to 'look across' the curriculum, reflecting on the foundations of their knowledge attained in previous years and the way subject content, methods, and new material can be synthesised in the research process in the final year.

4. Writing rationale

The module is focused on high-level academic writing and accurate citation of scholarly source material appropriate to the final year of a BA Hons degree. The emphasis is on maximum clarity, especially when using technical or theoretical terms. The imagined reader is a film scholar or well-educated cinephile/cineaste (who might be accessing the web pages). Trying to ensure that writing is accessible for this latter group when published on the web prompts discussion and awareness of scholarly and other writing styles.

5. Overall progress in 2010-2011

The module was piloted in 2010-11 with 15 students and it was a great success with high satisfaction ratings in module evaluation and positive comments in the student focus group. The attendance was good, students were very motivated and high quality work has been produced. Also, the module website has been created: <http://www.mcc.slif.qmul.ac.uk/>.

Students enjoyed the different approach and stated that they felt the module had improved their appreciation of different styles of writing and their writing competency. They were particularly positive about getting the chance to work in a small group. Interestingly, they were very relaxed about critiquing each other's work and submitting their own work for critique. This sharing of writing practice and their mature ability to offer critique, support and encouragement was very positive indeed.

There was some legitimate concern regarding paperwork and structure, both of which were being worked out and revised as the module progressed. A number of further changes have been planned for the new iteration of the module in 2011-12, and two 'how to edit' classes will be incorporated into the module structure. A major aim over the next two years is to seek greater coverage on the website with more content generated by students from within and without QM..

6. Tutor Reflections

My belief is that giving students ownership of the researching and writing process is an effective way of encouraging learning and this belief has been confirmed and consolidated through my experience of working on this project.

I would counsel people trying to put in place research-based learning/teaching initiatives to be aware of a conservative streak in students stemming from their anxiety that doing something new/different/more challenging may have an adverse impact on their grades. When planning a project, one would be well advised to think of strategies to overcome this worry, which can have a negative impact on morale and commitment.