ENGLISH LITERATURE POST-16 (II):
ISSUES AND APPROACHES

Simon Gibbons
Department of Education and Professional Studies, King’s College London

Introduction
Enabling student teachers to develop the confidence and skills to teach post-16 English Literature is perhaps as difficult now as it has ever been. The recent introduction of new specifications may have reduced the number of assessed modules, but it remains difficult for student teachers to have the time to take on sustained teaching at this level in placement schools. Understandably, classroom teachers and mentors, possibly teaching students facing examinations as early as January of Year 12, are reluctant to hand over classes. Many Secondary English ITE courses are now officially described as 11-16 courses (with post-16 enhancement). Quite simply, institutions feel that with the difficulty of being able to guarantee sustained A level teaching, it is better not to run the risk of falling foul of the inspection process. Additionally, there is precious little space during taught sessions to address the area.

A level English Literature teaching, too, can seem particularly daunting to student teachers. This may be in part due to a mythology created around A level teaching that there is something fundamentally different about it, that it is a particular intellectual challenge, and that it takes some years of experience to be inducted into its practices. One leading text for English student teachers points to this when it suggests that some schools see post-16 literature teaching as ‘an ‘award’ that you can only attain when you have taught successfully in the main school’ (Davison and Dowson 2009, p. 293). But there are other issues. More than one young student teacher – typically those who go straight from school to university to teacher education – has talked to me simply of feeling not much older than an A level student themselves, and of finding it difficult to create the necessary distance in the classroom. One student teacher I taught once wrote in his reflective journal of his lack of confidence in establishing the ‘correct level of formality’ in the A level classroom.

And within these perhaps perennial issues, issues around teaching literature at post-16 now sit within an increasingly fierce debate about both the nature of subject English and the constitution of education at 14-19. The ‘threefold way’ open to students at 16, to follow Literature, Language, or the combined option, has been forcefully critiqued in a publication by the NATE Post-16 Committee (Bluett et al, 2004), and the report by Mike Tomlinson’s committee (2004) – prompted in part at least by major concerns in the A level system – though initially pushed to the backburner, has turned the heat on the hitherto conventional thinking that has pervaded the curriculum and assessment diet for students in England. Thus, student teachers, given the manifold other pressures on their time and resources to meet the enormous range of Standards across two key stages, may feel that there is little to attract them to the demands of coming to grips with post-16 English Literature teaching.
Yet post-16 English Literature teaching is or will be, for many, one of the great joys and privileges of English teaching as a career. In aiming to inspire such emotions in the student teachers with whom I work, and in the limited time available on an ITE course, I hope to tackle what I see to be the core issues in the area, and these fall, for me, into four key areas: subject knowledge and subject content; teaching and learning approaches; the A level literature cohort; assessment issues.

Key Issue 1: Student teachers’ subject knowledge and subject content
The most recent AS/A2 specifications have relaxed some of the constraints associated with the previous incarnations. There is now scope to study one text in translation and a requirement for a modern (post-1990) text. Additionally there is increased weighting for coursework and the possibility for creative responses to texts studied. Still, however, the actual number and range of texts now studied across Years 12 and 13 can seem limited.

Depending on a student teacher’s own educational background, she will feel more or less confident when considering the average AS/A2 specification prescribed booklist. English graduates will probably have been able to specialise at fairly early points in their undergraduate lives – even following a very traditional degree at a London university, I managed to negotiate three years without having to deal with any English 19th century novelists. Thus, one clear issue – which may be more or less acute depending on the student teacher’s degree – is subject knowledge in terms of breadth of reading; this is an area, one would assume, that a student teacher is keen to tackle.

Beyond content in terms of texts, there is the much more difficult question of the mode of literary criticism that is proposed by the specifications. Some have argued for a greater emphasis on literary theory in the post-16 English Literature course, where others argue for less. What is true is that implicit within the new assessment objectives are distinct critical approaches – though in fact contradictory approaches may be at work. There is still a clear emphasis on practical criticism at A level – notably in what now stands as Assessment Objectives 1 and 2 – but there are, too, reader-response notions embodied in Assessment Objective 3 and perhaps new historical approaches (and more) enshrined in Assessment Objective 4. I will deal with these assessment objectives more explicitly later, but I mention them here to set against the knowledge student teachers come to us from university courses with. It is highly probable many will have addressed literary theory as an element of their degree, and how this can inform A level teaching is something to raise. A question for me as an ITE tutor is to think about how much time it is worth devoting to considering with my student teachers the place and value of literary theory in the A level classroom. Whatever developments occur at A level, this question of the role of theory – be it explicit or implicit – is one to address.

‘Subject knowledge’ I might also take to mean the memories student teachers have of their own A level studies (though not all will have studied literature; indeed I myself am evidence of the fact that not all ITE English tutors will have studied English Literature at sixth form level). It is typical for student teachers to have powerful memories of their own A level work; certainly at interview when I ask for an example of an influential teacher I get more than an average number of responses singling out A level English teachers. This can be an issue, though. I sense there is a certain ‘Golden Age-ism’ created around A levels on many fronts – that they used to be bigger and broader, and that being a student was an empowering experience. Though this may be true in some cases, there are doubtless many other reasons why adults may look back to the sixth form...
age with particularly fond memories. A recent radio report on one of those fundamentally pointless lifestyle surveys, indicated that 17 was the age most ‘grown-ups’ would like to return to. As I’ll suggest in the sections on Teaching and Learning and the A Level Cohort, viewing the past through rosy spectacles might have potentially damaging effects. In this case it is essential that student teachers reconsider their own experiences as A level students before taking on the role of the teacher.

Key Issue 2: Approaches to teaching and learning

It is a well recorded phenomenon that there are temptations for the student teacher to approach teaching at A level with a different sense of what constitutes effective approaches to teaching and learning. The change in approach may be prompted by a whole manner of considerations, including – and these are not mutually exclusive – the student teacher’s own experience as an A level learner, preconceptions in relation to the classes before her, a ‘trickle down’ effect from experiences within higher education, or a response to external assessment pressures.

Whatever the source of the problem, the manifestation can be seen in the practice of many beginning A level teaching – and, indeed, all too often in the practice of vastly experienced teachers, which may, too, be a serious contributory factor. An increasingly didactic approach, heavily directed annotation of texts, large quantities of background notes, a standard whole class ‘seminar’ style lesson structure, a reliance on students’ note-taking skills, heightened expectation of independent reading and research might all be parts of the caricature of post-16 teaching I am imagining. I do not exclude myself from the range of people I know to have become different teachers in front of sixth form students. The same teachers who are devising and planning imaginative and engaging interactive group work approaches to texts in Year 8 are only a lectern short of lecturing in Year 12.

This is clearly an over-exaggeration, but highlights for me a key issue to raise with student teachers when beginning work on A level teaching. Put simply it is to reaffirm and revisit what are effective approaches to text. Drama, role play, structured group oral work, DARTs activities, are as important at A level as elsewhere, and are critical in the process of scaffolding the development of independent, informed learners in the classroom. For there is clearly a need to further develop the A level literature student’s independence as a learner and critical thinker. But this is not achieved by suddenly expecting the average 17 year old to be capable of researching and presenting, or through some process of metamorphosis that happens after GCSE when students go into a chrysalis state following their final Year 11 examination to emerge in September of Year 12 as fully evolved, sophisticated and eloquent critical thinkers.

It is perhaps the case that changes to post-16 assessment have intensified pressure on teachers, and thus on learners. Certainly, I’ve plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that the pressure to ‘spoon feed’ has come from GCSE, thereby creating a clear conflict between the drive to empower autonomous learners and the sense of wanting to give kids what they need to negotiate AS and A2 modules. We’ve all heard the A level teachers bewailing the inability of new English Literature students to read and analyse independently, having been heavily directed towards GCSE examinations. As someone who teaches first year undergraduates on English degree programmes, I’m not surprised when I read letters like that published in the Times Educational Supplement from a
university tutor pleading for students to come to him better equipped to independently offer a critical response to an unseen text.

Student teachers will no doubt witness the pressures on teachers and students to ‘deliver’ results at work in the classrooms they see. In such a climate it becomes even more important to spend the limited time in taught sessions focusing on effective teaching and learning, and re-emphasising the sense that students who read widely and interrogate texts thoughtfully, and who are helped to write well, will negotiate the assessment hurdles put in their path at the end of modules.

**Key Issue 3: The A level cohort**

The notion that A level literature classes were ever the exclusive habitat of insatiable bibliophiles probably does belong to that branch of history termed ‘Golden Age-ism’. I was one of no doubt countless grammar school boys who wanted to do English but was ‘encouraged’ to do maths and science because I could. Others in my school had little option but to take English as part of the ‘soft’ option of an arts-based sixth form curriculum. There is, however, I suspect, something in the notion expressed to me by teachers and student teachers alike that AS classes in particular contain increasing numbers of students who not only don’t read, but who, in fact, seem to actively dislike the pursuit.

There may be a number of reasons for this. Certainly the effort to broaden the range of subjects studied at A level heralded by Curriculum 2000 inevitably means that some students will take English as a fourth, or even fifth, option. These students, if not taking the subject under duress, will certainly not be taking it with any necessarily great enthusiasm, and may have every intention of dropping it at the end of Year 12. It may be that it is English purely in preference to an even less palatable option. Having to choose five AS subjects can put pressures on timetabling to the extent where, in fact, students are left with few options for fourth or fifth choices. As ever in education, it is the illusion of choice, rather than choice itself, that has been sold to parents, teachers and students.

In addition to the attitude of the AS/A2 cohort, there is the further question of aptitude. There is ever greater encouragement for students to stay in education until eighteen, and A levels – with their ‘traditional security’ (Fleming and Stevens 2004, p.124) – continue to be the desired choice; the lukewarm response to Tomlinson will not change this in the short term. Many English departments, rightly in my view, will allow on to their AS courses any student achieving a C grade or above in English/Literature GCSE. There is, and always has been, a jump from pre- to post-16 study, but I would argue that teachers have become incredibly skilled at enabling students to achieve that benchmark C at GCSE. Ironically, of course, this is not achieved through cheating the coursework system, but rather through being able to successfully manipulate the so-called rigour of the external examination system. The result may well be an even steeper learning curve for some of the AS cohort. In essence, as has been noted, the cohort will increasingly have a wide range of ‘interest, commitment and aptitude’ (Fleming and Stevens 2004, p.123).

And what of English Literature GCSE content? It is no longer possible – in theory – to pass GCSE without having read a whole novel, but, in practice, this happens, and certainly the majority of GCSE schemes of work are scant preparation for the (admittedly reduced) demands of the reading at AS level. We’ve all heard the groans and seen the
faces of AS students as they are asked to contemplate the reading of a text of more than 100 pages.

Factors like this mean that even for very recent graduates, the nature of the A level cohort may well be very different from either their experience or preconception. Rather than prematurely turning into ‘grumpy old teachers’, mourning the lack of passion for reading amongst students, some investigation of cohorts seems necessary, and may well affect student teachers’ expectations as they teach A level classes.

Key Issue 4: Assessment
As a former senior examiner for one of the A level boards, I am particularly interested in assessment of post-16 literature. Without wishing to go into the ins and outs of coursework weighting versus examination load, or comparing the specific differences of different boards and specifications, it is certainly the case that a key issue around the teaching of post-16 English Literature, and one that many current teachers, as well as those entering the profession, need to get to grips with is the impact of the five assessment objectives which are common to all specifications. It’s of course the case that the manner of assessment will have an influence on teaching, and there are many who are highly critical of the AS/A2 assessment objectives, suggesting that – as the arguments always go – they lead to formulaic teaching, training of students to jump hurdles and the like. It’s not, I will claim, having a vested interest that leads me to disagree in principle with these arguments. I actually think, in general, the assessment objectives – with reservations about the model of criticism they enshrine, perhaps – articulate the very sorts of knowledge and skills I would want post-16 English Literature students to be developing. I don’t have the kinds of principled oppositions to them that I had to, for example, the key stage 3 mark schemes, which seemed to utterly fragment the assessment of both reading and writing to a point where the parts – even if they were sound – were an inadequate method of assessing the whole (something I would contend is equally true of APP). There are obviously levels of artificiality, in the way that certain AS/A2 papers and questions specifically target particular assessment objectives, and here are the hurdles teachers need clear knowledge to help their students leap, but in general, I would assert that good AS/A2 teaching will empower students to respond to the objectives as laid down.

The particular aspects of the assessment that seem to cause the tensions are assessment objectives 3 and 4. AO3 is the requirement to show understanding of others’ interpretations; AO4 is the demand for knowledge of social, historical, cultural context. There have been, and continue to be, confusing messages and understandings about what precisely these things mean in practice. In the worst cases, they have led to teachers thinking that there is a need for a heavy injection of literary theory, so that students can clearly state what a Marxist critic might make of Othello, and that it is essential to wheel out everything about the French revolution before beginning an argument on Wordsworth’s The Prelude. The reality is far from this, of course, but there remains confusion here – indeed at least one text for student teachers claims that A level students are expected ‘to be well acquainted with critical readings of the texts, and with cultural theories such as feminism, new historicism and postcolonialism’ (Davison and Dowson 2009, p. 292). English student teachers need to engage with these confusions, in order to develop their own expertise and to be able to deal with attitudes they may encounter in placement schools. And it seems to me that when (there is never an ‘if’ about such
A level English Literature specifications are rewritten these areas will continue to be an issue – whether or not they retain the current tags.

**Approaches 1: Subject knowledge and subject content**

Student teachers clearly need to come to terms with what constitutes content in terms of subject knowledge as currently specified. At its simplest, this means the range of texts currently deemed worthy of study. However, before being tempted to take as read what is A level English Literature, it is fruitful perhaps for student teachers to consider the wider question – if this is not done elsewhere on the course – of what constitutes literature. A reading of Terry Eagleton’s chapter ‘What is Literature?’ should encourage this debate (Eagleton, 1982). Another key recommended text for my student teachers, Robert Scholes’ *Textual Power* (1985), further challenges assumptions within what Scholes calls the ‘English apparatus’. Additionally, though targeted at A level and undergraduate students, Robert Eaglestone’s *Doing English* (2000) can provide valuable reading for anyone teaching those groups.

There is, too, value in looking at other ways in which subject content is constructed in alternative models of post-16 literature education. *Text: Message* has models of post-16 curricula taken from the International Baccalaureate and the Victorian Certificate of Education from Australia (Bluett et al, 2004).

Once a wider debate has been raised, and future work can be placed in the context that ‘it doesn’t have to be this way’, a good approach is to ask student teachers to complete a very simple self-audit and use this as a starting point for some shared reading. Simply, I’ve taken the current set book lists from across the specifications (all downloadable) and sent student teachers off to tick from the list those they are comfortable and familiar with. Comparing across the group (in my case 20-25 student teachers) reveals major ‘gaps’ and texts which are familiar to many or all. Within the lists there are texts that are seldom seen in school. Equally, there are popular choices that may be relatively unknown (often newer texts like *Snow Falling on Cedars* or *Vernon God Little*).

Bearing these factors in mind the second stage of this subject knowledge audit is to ask student teachers to choose a text (I might do the choosing) from the list of those taught but relatively unknown and read and prepare a short review/presentation (with accompanying handout) identifying key issues, teaching points, etc. These short presentations have been shared as short slots at the end of taught sessions (in parallel with similar work going on around a Key Stage 3 fiction audit). I’ve found that this is a useful – though very obvious – way to develop subject knowledge, and – additionally – it has proved to be enjoyable. It’s refreshing for a group of English student teachers, to talk about books. Having a short weekly slot for feedback on an A level book helps to keep the issue bubbling away throughout the year. David Stevens, a colleague at Durham university, has said to me that he does a similar activity, but with student teachers researching and feeding back on resources available to post-16 students, including websites, CD Roms and DVDs – good examples would include the Proquest Literature website (www.literature.proquestlearning.com) and Andrew Moore’s Universal Teacher site (www.universalteacher.org.uk).

Something I’ve done with both GCSE and A level specifications in order to try and quickly get a sense of subject content, and the different options available is to break the student teachers into smaller groups and allocate each group a particular specification and
a prompt sheet for a presentation. The prompt sheet asks the group to quickly research their given specification and prepare a handout and short presentation to the rest of the group, outlining particular features – e.g. coursework options, exam titles, interesting text options. The feedback session need not be lengthy, but it is a way to open up a broader discussion about the options available at A level, and the potential of the different courses for different kinds of school students.

Another obvious activity, but nonetheless useful for that, is to engage with student teachers in some reflection on their own experience as A level students. This can form a useful starting point to university sessions on A level teaching, and can be as simple as small group discussions reflecting on memories of texts studied, teaching approaches taken, or particular teachers. Information and ideas generated from these discussions can reverberate through sessions on A level teaching approaches, considerations of A level cohort, and issues to do with A level assessment.

This kind of reflection can result in more formal written work. For example, in the past, as part of some work inspired by NATE’s ITE Committee, I asked my group to consider their experience as a learner of English across school and university, articulating what they perceived to be differences in approach to English pre-, during and post-A level. This revealed some quite interesting things about undergraduate English teaching (and it is perhaps worth raising as an issue how far A level English Literature should be a preparation for degree study, given that the vast majority of those taking it won’t go on to higher education in that particular subject). It also provided quite a complex picture of A level experience. Some strong memories were shared of ‘inspirational’ experiences, though this was not often articulated in terms of particularly innovative or creative teaching and learning strategies, but more in terms of charismatic teachers, or in terms of relationships formed. It might be difficult to think about how one engenders charisma, but it is certainly worth pursuing discussions about how you foster the particular types of effective relationships at A level, where, I suppose, the ideal is to allow A level students to feel, in a sense, on a par with their teachers, though still at some professional distance. Of course, the relationships are not formed in isolation to the teaching and learning strategies, and indeed when considering teaching and learning approaches I would place an emphasis here on how fostering autonomous learners at least allows, if not actually creates, such relationships.

Within a broader subject knowledge audit that all my ITE English group complete at the beginning of the year, I ask the student teachers to tell me something of the literary theory they have encountered (and are comfortable with) through their previous degree work. Later in the course as we approach A level teaching I am keen to encourage student teachers to consider in what ways their knowledge of literary theory can inform their own teaching. The issue should not be sidestepped, for as has been pointed out, whenever we teach literature there is always a theory in place (Scholes, 1985); at the very least student teachers should make explicit for themselves the kinds of theory that influence their own response to text.

**Approaches 2: Teaching and learning**

As an A level teacher, I was myself often far too guilty of forgetting the kinds of active reading approaches that constitute good practice around texts. Aware of this, and aware that student teachers will probably see lessons where this is the case, I always think it is good to start by reassessing active reading approaches and seeing how they can be used
with A level texts. At the very simplest level I find it useful to revisit tried and trusted DARTs activities, asking student teachers to devise activities around poems or the openings of novels using these techniques. Similarly, I think it important to encourage the use of drama in the A level classroom – both in the study of drama itself, and in developing responses to fiction and poetry. With my group I will look at typical A level texts – a Blake poem, perhaps – and create a series of tableaux, for example, and consider how this helps to develop understanding of the text. There can be some issues taking these activities into the classroom – A level classes thinking this is not ‘real work’ in comparison to the note taking sessions they undertake in other subjects. For this reason I think my student teachers need the chance to reassess these sorts of approaches themselves and reconsider their use at A level. What’s for sure is that if as a teacher you don’t build these approaches into A level teaching early in a course, it becomes increasingly difficult as a different teaching and learning discourse roots itself in the classroom.

At the same time, I encourage student teachers to think about how lesson/learning objectives can be used effectively in A level teaching. As a Head of English, and as a Borough consultant I saw many, many A level English lessons taught by teachers who would methodically make learning objectives explicit at the beginning of Key Stage 3 and 4 lessons, but whose post-16 lessons never looked at learning in this way. I’m not necessarily advocating writing objectives on the board at the start of lessons and ticking them off at the end, but if making learning intentions explicit is a good strategy then it should hold for 17 year-olds as well as 14 year-olds. Being explicit about how lesson activities relate to the specifications and assessment objectives seems to me to be something worth considering. It’s about relating individual lessons into the ‘bigger picture’ of the study of a text or group of related texts and – simultaneously – about linking day to day work with the overarching knowledge and skills in terms of developing as a critical reader and as a student able to confidently negotiate the assessment hurdles.

Developing students’ autonomy is something to think about. Clearly adopting a seminar approach and asking A level students to go off and read the next chapter, or research an aspect of the text and report back is a useful strategy, but I would encourage student teachers to think about how to do this in a structured way, offering support, guidance and guidelines for presentation, to scaffold and support the moves towards independence. Again, when thinking about setting up A level student seminars/presentations, topics need to be clearly related to objectives which link back to the ‘big picture’. In articulating the sorts of readers and learners we would like to foster in the A level English Literature classroom, Scholes’ model of reading, interpretation and criticism is a powerful paradigm (Scholes 1985).

Since the development of AS and A2 post 2000, I’ve done significant thinking myself about the two assessment objectives that create the greatest unease – namely AO 3 and AO4: the need to show understanding of others’ interpretations and the need to show knowledge of context. As I have said, both of these areas seem wholly legitimate, and areas that should continue to be central to literary studies whatever their manifestation within specifications and assessment objectives. The question for teachers is how do you stop ‘other interpretations’ becoming some kind of pseudo undergraduate, and ultimately misleading, course in literary theory, and prevent the study of ‘contexts’ turning into a
history lesson, with the end result being students who offload paragraphs of contextual baggage in coursework assignments and examination essays.

With my student teachers, I spend a session experimenting with different classroom activities, all of which seem to me to be picking up on good teaching and learning around texts, but which seem particularly to draw attention to the assessment objectives in question. The ‘What’s My Line’ game (Figure 1), where different members of a group assume a different role and then offer an interpretation of a poem from that perspective is always fun – the easiest example is to read a World War 1 poem, and evaluate it from the position of a conscript, a volunteer, a general or a politician. The literary theory version of ‘What’s My Line’ asks student teachers to offer a view of a poem from a particular critical perspective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What’s My Line?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Cut up the cards below and place in an envelope with a copy of Rupert Brooke’s ‘The Soldier’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In groups of 8, deal the cards – one per person. Keep the card to yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read the poem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Take 3 minutes to produce a quick response to the poem from the point of view of the person on the card</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read around the group and see if you can tell who each person is from their reading</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Politician
As a leader of the country you see the ‘bigger picture’. You are not pleased that people are dying, but it is an inevitable consequence of the action that had to be taken. You sympathise with the families of the dead and wounded, but see no alternative.

Conscript
You were called up to be a soldier in the army. You didn’t volunteer, but feel it is right to do your duty. You have been scared and appalled at some of things you have seen, but believe there is no real option but to fight.

Army General
You are proud, patriotic and fiercely in favour of this war. It is an absolutely necessary course of action to defend the country. You expect that all men of the country will be proud to fight and, if necessary, die for their country.

Conscientious Objector
You refused to answer the call up, believing passionately in peace and thinking that all killing, even in war, is wrong. You have been sent to prison for your beliefs and your refusal to fight.

Mother
You are the mother of a young man who has recently died in the trenches. You are full of grief, and have a real sense of the waste of human life that is going on as a result of this war.

Partner
Your partner is fighting on the front line. You receive letters regularly, in which he recounts some of the terrible experiences he has had, and the appalling sights he has seen.

Volunteer
You joined the army as soon as war broke out. You are proud to fight for your country and want to defend the land that you love.

Figure 1: ‘What’s My Line’ Game

Another activity I’ve seen used to great effect in the classroom is the short film adaptation of a poem (e.g. Wordsworth’s ‘Solitary Reaper’) with different groups given a brief to create a storyboard accentuating a different aspect of the poem. I was very interested, too, in the work done by one student teacher last year, who, after our A level taught sessions, devised a ‘This Is Your Life’ activity linked to her class’s study of Doctor Faustus. To address context in a stimulating way, she gave students in the class roles of people connected with Marlowe (university peers, fellow playwrights, etc.) and then role-played an episode of the famous show, with each student being brought onto the set to relate their particular anecdote about the star of the show.
A simple timeline activity (Figure 2) can be used to ask A level students to research events occurring around the time of a text’s writing. Completed prior to reading, with pairs/individuals providing brief research findings on particularly events, the significance of the timeline’s events can be considered if and when a reading of the text would be informed by them.

### Chaucer Timeline

All these events happened between 1300-1400. Students are assigned one or more of these events. They research to find key facts about the person/event. The class then constructs a timeline to be used as a backdrop when studying the text, annotating the text and/or timeline when there seems to be a significant example of contextual influence on the text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>William Wallace captured and executed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip IV expels Jews from France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward II becomes King of England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Battle of Bannockburn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teutonic Knights crusade in Poland and Lithuania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward III becomes King, Edward II dies in prison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hundred Years War begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petrarch crowned Poet Laureate in Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England captures Calais</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Death breaks out in England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persecution of Jews in Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boccaccio writes The Decameron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaucer captured by French soldiers – Edward III contributes to ransom costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First version of Piers Plowman appears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For the first time, the King addresses parliament in English, not French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wat Tyler’s peasants’ revolt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government controlled by John of Gaunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard II becomes King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard II overthrown by Henry IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wycliffe produces first English translation of Bible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2: Chaucer timeline activity**

Using these and other activities with student teachers, the emphasis is on evaluating how useful they would be in a classroom context, and the extent to which they allow an active engagement with the text and with the assessment objectives without being reduced to jumping through a hoop or clambering over a hurdle. My assertion would be that these activities enable meaningful teaching and learning around the texts whilst enabling an explicit engagement with the assessment objectives.
Approaches 3: The A level cohort
In considering their own A level experience, student teachers will begin to reflect upon issues relating to the current A level cohort, but for the issues outlined earlier, some specific research into this area is needed. This is best undertaken in taught sessions, I’ve found, after some initial fact-finding in placement schools. The simple methods seem to work best – a combination of talking to teachers to get a sense of their perception of changes in A level cohort over the years, observation of lessons, and conversations with students themselves.

All of these things can be done on a more or less formal basis, depending on the nature of the evidence desired and the feedback session to follow. It might be an idea (and one I’m considering) to ask student teachers to carry out some systematic questionnaires with A level students, to form part of an assignment (the third assignment on our PGCE is currently as small scale ‘action research’ project, the focus of which might well be A level teaching). A questionnaire devised by student teachers to present to an A level class might include areas such as:

- nature of reading habits (amount read for pleasure, types of text, attitudes to different types of text)
- attitudes to the canon
- reasons for choosing AS/A2 level English
- expectations of the A level course
- attitudes to writing
- favoured teaching/classroom approaches to texts
- experience of literature as a GCSE subject
- future plans, i.e. how do they see the ‘use’ of English in their own future

The idea of asking students about their own preferred methods of learning is not a new one (see the proposed sixth form questionnaire in Fleming and Stevens 2005, p. 126), and would be a useful activity to undertake in isolation before taking a class, but a fuller investigation of the A level cohort would be a worthwhile way to explore the reality of what confronts the post-16 teacher.

Approaches 4: Assessment
Assessment is clearly critical within the confines of a short AS/A2 course. However, as I have said elsewhere, I think the way that assessment works at this level need not lead to a situation where the curriculum dog is being wagged by the examination tail. Effective teaching and learning strategies around the set texts, with a sharp awareness of the way that the assessment system works in terms of coursework and examination will empower students.

The principles underlying the work around assessment for learning hold good for A level; relating lesson plans and activities to clear objectives, linked to the wider perspectives of the course, form part of this. Using classroom activities that specifically develop students’ critical skills in relation to context, or to other viewpoints, directly relates to assessment. In addition, the formative use of the assessment criteria – coursework and examination – seems to me to be an essential area in which student teachers need to develop their skills.
One obvious, though nonetheless useful, way to start work like this is to engage student teachers directly with the assessment criteria in the specification. Working in groups to rewrite, annotate and exemplify the five current AOs is an activity I’ve asked my student teachers to undertake (indeed they do this with the National Curriculum levels, too) and though it is time consuming and difficult, they also insist it is valuable work. The act of recasting the assessment criteria so that they are readily accessible to AS students themselves not only sharpens student teachers’ own knowledge, it also leads into effective marking and target-setting – i.e. formative assessment – in the classroom. Some student teachers will mirror the activity with AS classes, given the opportunity, others will use their rewritten criteria and share them with students during peer- and self-assessment activities over written work in the classroom.

Specifically in relation to terminal examinations, I’ve always found it useful to look at sample questions and mark schemes with my group, and to highlight keywords in questions and identify what the mark schemes cite as distinctive features of answers at different levels. Question papers and mark schemes are all downloadable, and it is useful to augment these with examples of A level students’ written answers so that student teachers can engage in some shared assessment. Though this may well happen in placement schools, I think it is reassuring for student teachers to tackle this kind of marking amongst their peers, so that they have the chance to develop confidence before being expected to do so in school, when it can be an intimidating experience to show your marking before experienced teachers. Now that schools are entitled to ask for return of examination scripts, it is helpful to exploit a contact and get some photocopied examples of genuine exam work.

Perhaps as a former A level examiner I overstress with my student teachers the importance of teaching effective examination writing. I don’t apologise for this, and what I don’t think is that it is about teaching students how to jump hurdles. Put simply, I have marked numerous papers written by students who obviously know their texts extraordinarily well, and who have interesting responses, but who have not been taught the effective ways in which to convey those responses. As part of a session with my student teachers I like to show them the kind of modelling of writing I do with A level students: taking an exam question, highlighting the key words, planning an answer, writing the opening two or three paragraphs, highlighting and annotating as I go, to show how I am using my knowledge of the text effectively. This does lead to discussions about how far the actual process of exam writing is about learning tricks, but again I see this as something I would want student teachers to be able to do in order to empower the students they teach. A partial understanding of assessment systems leads to the kind of mechanistic hurdle jumping that in most cases is counterproductive, whilst a real internalising of the modes of assessment in place should be liberating.

In respect of activities like shared marking sessions, consideration of mark schemes and modelling exam writing, I think I’m comfortable to do this as a trained examiner. However, given that assessment procedures have recently changed I am now much more inclined to invite a current A level teacher in to cover these areas. This is particularly valuable when it comes to looking at new types of assessment – the specific questions raised, for example, of the teaching and assessing of creative responses to text at post-16 level.
It could be argued that the kind of real familiarity with assessment criteria I am describing ought not to be the job of an English ITE course. Clearly, I would take the opposite view – I don’t think student teachers are done any favours if they approach A level planning and teaching without the chance to come to terms with, and learn to exploit, the assessment system.

**Concluding thoughts**
Teaching English Literature at post-16 level ought to be, as I hope I have made clear, viewed by student teachers as an enjoyable and rewarding pursuit. It is not, however, a pursuit which comes naturally to those entering the profession, and although some of the challenges are perhaps illusory, or if not that then at least constructed by the profession and the individuals within it themselves, others are genuinely ones with which to grapple. Given the current pressures and constraints at work in school sixth forms, it is perhaps not realistic to expect student teachers to graduate with full confidence in this area, but in addressing the key issues it should be possible to ensure that new entrants to the profession have a firm foundation on which experience can help them develop successful practice.

**References**

**Links to other areas of the ITE English website**
**Topics**
- Literature Study Post-16 (I)
- Literature Study Post-16 (II)

**Reading for Discussion**
- English Literature Post-16 (I): Overview and context