Literature in Context: Enquiry Based Learning for First Year English Students

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University College Dublin's decision to modularise and semesterise on a rolling basis from 2006 both presented a series of new challenges for our discipline and brought existing problems into sharper relief. We were primarily concerned by two key difficulties: the fact that students were – in our view – failing to make the transition from school to university as effectively as we had hoped, and the loss of a degree of cohesion within the year group. To put this slightly differently, we were concerned that our students were continuing the same habits of passive learning that they had experienced at school rather than making the leap to becoming active learners equipped with the requisite skills to pursue literary study at university level. Rather than depending, as was traditional, on a teacher-led approach, we became interested in the potential offered by Enquiry Based Learning (EBL) to foster student-led teaching and to embed research skills and critical thinking from the minute students stepped into a university classroom. This article describes the process of adaptation of EBL to a literature-based subject, the way that we tackled problem design and module delivery, and finally provides an analysis of student feedback after the first year of delivery.[1] We have included a detailed discussion of one of the three EBL problems that students tackled over the course of first year in order to give a clear sense of precisely what is involved for the student, the group facilitators and the module convenors.

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> A learning environment fostering the production of knowledge from the multiple discursive domains that bear on a literary text relies on information sources of varied depth, coverage and media…Having formulated a research question relevant to the literary text under scrutiny, students need to be able to identify resources, classify them, evaluate their usefulness, and often navigate across disparate discursive domains.[2]

With a very few exceptions, Enquiry Based Learning (EBL) has remained the province of practice based and/or professional disciplines where it has most frequently been used to mimic 'live' decision-making situations, and to illustrate the inefficacy of fact-based, as opposed to context-driven, analysis. Hence it has been prominent in

health sciences where PEBL (Problem and Enquiry Based Learning) has been used successfully to teach students skills that facilitate and complement clinical and diagnostic competencies. In this context EBL practitioners O'Rourke and Hutchings ask, ironically, 'what possible reason could there be for seeking to apply PBL methods to a subject that is wholly impractical, with no apparent application to real-life situations?'[3] The answer, we argue here, lies in the close fit between the nature of studying English, and the kinds of activities that EBL requires of students. As Karen Cardozo notes, 'literary knowledge is not structured hierarchically to the same degree as concepts in math or science'.[4] The humanities typically make a virtue of their provisional and contingent nature, often preferring to focus on skills acquisition as an automatic side-effect of the mastery of content. Cardozo argues that the focus on content in the teaching of literature obscures attention to 'methods of inquiry', which constitute the 'hidden curriculum' of many contemporary courses (pp. 415, 416). Traditional delivery, based upon large amounts of self-directed, independent reading, taught through lectures and tutorials/seminars, tends to assume a closed feedback loop, where the student acquires the requisite skills from exposure to the materials without the intervention of significant apparatus or pedagogical infrastructure. The relationship between skills acquired and materials covered is sometimes both arbitrary and contingent. Our perception, based on several years of teaching both first year students and students at later stages of their degree programmes, was that undergraduates seemed to lack skills and knowledge that we would consider essential to the discipline and crucial for future development – critical thinking skills, methods of argument, evaluation of evidence, historical understanding and ideas about textual culture. Cardozo suggests that

> one response…might be to move toward an integrated system of pedagogical processes that enable students to make sense of the variegated curriculum while honing particular skills (p. 427)

In order to achieve this end, we decided to adapt EBL to the teaching of English. This article will address course design and delivery, student responses and the attainment of learning objectives. We begin, however, by outlining some of the specific challenges that emerge in the context of the Irish education system, particularly in relation to secondary schooling, State examinations and the operational setting in University College Dublin, although most of the issues that we are trying to confront are widespread in the discipline.

The Context

The examination for school leavers in Ireland (the Leaving Certificate) that determines entry into third-level education is not as specialised as the A-level system, being closer to the Scottish Higher, and students do not have the same level of detailed specialisation in any one subject as equivalent first year entrants in England. It requires all students to have a broader base of knowledge over a wider range of subjects which can be taken at higher (honours) or ordinary (pass) level. Each grade achieved by students in each subject is assigned a point value. Places on third-level courses are assigned through the Central Applications System (CAO) on the basis of number of points achieved and number of places available on each course in any given year. This is thus straightforwardly a supply and demand system, with no other criterion for entry other than Leaving Certificate 'points'.[5] Minimum requirements for entry into most third level BA courses is a pass grade in six subjects (including English, Irish and one other language) and all students must achieve a minimum

standard in two subjects taken at higher level. The Leaving Certificate is a highly competitive, points-oriented examination and despite some recent reforms (notably in geography and history) the Leaving Certificate primarily deploys summative assessment in the form of closed examinations. The examination has been criticised for promoting rote learning; 'the rational second-level student concentrates on such shallow learning in place of developing more analytical skills', it has been claimed; and preparation for the examination, generally over a two-year period, is seen to cultivate highly individualised learners focussed solely on the accumulation of points.[6]

In general, third-level courses with particular professional qualifications, such as Medicine and Architecture, have a restricted number of places offered each year, have a very high entry points (often 500+) and typically attract students with the highest grades from the Leaving Certificate. More general degree courses that account for a majority of places in the Irish university sector (in the Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Science, and Commerce Faculties for instance) have more places on offer and thus lower points requirements. These interlinked factors mean that students taking such courses represent a much wider range of ability. In addition, BA students in UCD are generalists in their first year of this fully modularised undergraduate programme, and subject areas (other than languages) do not impose minimum standards for entry. The BA 'Omnibus' programme in UCD requires students to take a minimum of 10 ECTS credits only (two 12-week modules) in any one subject at level 1 in their first year (or 'Stage').[7] The remaining 50 credits required to advance to Stage 2 (the 2 year or 4 semester degree cycle) can be acquired in a range of 30+ subjects. Students are encouraged to take a minimum of 20 credits in subjects they want to pursue to degree level and most of our students take all four English modules (20 credits) offered at Stage 1. This means, however, that two thirds of the modules our students take are in subjects other than English, and the combination of subjects pursued is very varied. The structure of the programme does not facilitate synergies between cognate subject areas and there is currently no module common to all students. This is in marked contrast to other open-entry degrees such as Commerce or Science, where the choice of subjects and modules is more limited and differs completely from subjects that typically use EBL/PBL methods such as Medicine, Nursing or, increasingly, Engineering, where the first year programmes are designed strictly and all students follow a structured package of modules. The challenges of curriculum design for our first year English students, then, are considerable and include the following:

➢ Students enter third-level as highly individualised learners

➢ Stage one Arts students have a diverse range of abilities with a comparatively small percentage of high-achieving students (approx 12%) and a high percentage of mid-range students[8]

➢ A significant proportion of such students are not yet committed to English as a degree subject and take the subject for one year/two semesters only (approx. 40%)[9]

➢ There is a reduced common-knowledge base since students are pursuing different subject pathways in this modularised programme

➢ Stage one English accommodates one of the largest groups of students in the BA (approx. 480 registered students)

These challenges played a significant part in our decision to introduce EBL at Stage 1. Our first year classes are traditionally taught through the lecture format (with approximately 480 students per lecture), complemented by smaller group sessions of 25. O'Neill and Moore point out that the large classes that characterise many first and second year undergraduate programmes make it difficult 'to implement group work comprehensively' and argue, as a consequence, 'this reduced opportunity for social and peer-supported learning can be a key factor in inhibiting student retention and social learning.'[10] The use of group work that is integral to the dialogic learning at the core of the EBL process helps to provide the means by which key pedagogic and social aims could be achieved, given the defining features of our cohort of first year students.[11] Another central motivation behind the use of the EBL approach is the desire to inculcate broadly transferable scholarly habits (independent research; knowledge creation; problem solving; integrated learning). As Kahn and O'Rourke suggest, 'the focus on enquiry helps in synthesising learning which can be an issue in modular and inter-disciplinary programmes'.[12] This method allows students following a varied first year programme not only to identify as a student of English, but to apply the core research, team-work and information literacy skills to a broad range of modules at Stage One, and to make connections rather than follow a balkanised approach to individual modules. The opportunity for students to foster peer relationships in their first year at a new institution is clearly enhanced when a class of approximately 480 is broken down into much smaller units for the purposes of group work. The development of intellectual and social communities in what can be an overwhelming and alien environment for students is a personal and practical benefit of this method. In addition, the problem of student attrition can be more carefully monitored though the management of groups.[13]

Pedagogy, Design and Delivery

The various instabilities that are a feature of the UCD system, together with the learning styles of most of our students at entry and the operational challenges presented by a very large year group led us to conclude that the enquiry-based model is best offered in hybrid mode. We devised two related core modules, each of 5 ECTS, one to be delivered in each semester. Broadly speaking, the two modules together aimed to introduce students to the chronology of English literature, starting with Chaucer, moving through the Renaissance, eighteenth century, Romanticism, the Victorian period, and finishing with modernism. Our hybrid approach utilises key features of EBL methodology while retaining more conventional teaching and learning practices, including the delivery of a suite of lectures and marginally higher emphasis on individual rather than group marks.[14] Central to the module are the 50 minute weekly workshops with trained EBL facilitators. A blended EBL approach outlined by O'Neill and Moore in their study of group work for large cohorts of students features the use of 'roving tutors' who have been trained specifically to adapt to the non-podium driven learning that is the weekly workshop.[15] In addition, the erroneously-termed 'default' option of lecture delivery for large groups in our model is viewed as a key resource for the group work rather than as a passive learning experience, as outlined in greater detail below. The 'landscape' lecture (as we term it) remains an important and essential feature of both teaching and learning, contrary to the 'pure' EBL method, but vital to large group learning in a modularised system. The ideal of the two-hour workshop, the core of the pure-EBL model, is not possible within our highly complex programme timetable and the contextualising work needed to provide students with the background to benefit from the weekly workshop and

non-timetabled independent student meetings that were a feature of this module is still best achieved through the use of large-group lectures.[16]

Rather than giving a survey course, then, the assessed problems for each module were designed to encourage students to develop a sense of the historical context for each project. In the first semester module (Literature and Context 1) students tackled two problems, with five weeks allotted to a problem based on the General Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and five to one on Shakespeare and the Globe. The problems were designed to build up learning skills step-by-step, and became less structured and overtly ordered as the students gained knowledge and confidence. Thus the Chaucer problem (described below, pp. 10-16) guided students through a sequence of quite precise tasks that were accumulated to produce the final group presentation. In the case of Shakespeare, students were asked to pitch a campaign to promote the Globe to an audience of teenagers, using an adaptation of a Shakespeare play. Students were given a set of guidance notes to help them break down each problem and identify what research they needed to do to complete the task; these notes were expanded upon by the tutors in their classroom practice. By the second module (Literature and Context 2), students were given a very open-ended task (the design of a new periodical rooted in one of the key periods covered by the module, e.g. Augustan, Romantic, Victorian, Modernist) and asked to structure the breakdown of roles and jobs themselves with guidance and input from their tutors. As the modules are co-requisite, we could reasonably assume that students would be able to build on and apply their earlier experiences to their second semester work. The improved performance in Literature and Context 2 (see Figure 1 below) confirms that competencies acquired in semester 1 were deployed and used in semester 2 – this seems to us to be a major breakthrough in the context of the atomised nature of Stage 1. In addition to working on the set problems in groups, students also kept continuous learning/reading journals as a tool to aid reflection, as well as a means to provide a check and balance to the group work for assessment purposes. Having come through a highly individualistic system at secondary school, many students struggled at first with the concept of group work and it was important to be able to reassure them that the individual components carried weight in the final assessment and that the skills tested in the group work formed part of the assessment of the learning outcomes for each module.

Delivery presented some very real logistical challenges, given our high numbers and teaching rooms that were often poorly equipped for group work. From the outset, the students were assigned to a small group tutorial (SGT) of 25 students where they were subdivided on a random basis into smaller sub-groups. Relatively high numbers were assigned to groups to account for student attrition (8 per group in the first semester; 6 per group in the second). Rather than using the SGTs in the traditional way as the support for the standard information-based lecture, we inverted this model, making the SGT the primary unit of pedagogical currency, with the lectures providing structures, frameworks, suggestions, as it were the mechanism of exchange. That some students complained that the lectures 'didn't give us the answers' might be seen to indicate that this approach was somewhat successful, and that the EBL approach caused students to question their expectations about what lectures might and should deliver. This accords with the analysis of the transition from school to university undertaken by Keverne Smith, which asserts the necessity of 'learning by trial-and-error' in the progression towards becoming an independent learner.[17] Each SGT was assigned a facilitator, specifically trained in EBL delivery, to guide the group work; for most of the students, the tutor was a vital resource who

acted as the conduit leading the undergraduates to relevant websites, library databases, and in a few cases, libraries and archive material. Tutors were drawn primarily from our postgraduate cohort, although the project leaders also led an SGT in order to have direct experience of what was happening in the classroom. Tutors were required to undertake two days of intensive training to familiarise them with EBL teaching methodology, to road-test the problems and to role play a variety of group situations. These sessions were designed and run by the project team. The relationship between the groups and their tutor was by far the most important element in the successful delivery of the module, as the student evaluations amply attest. In addition, student numbers dictated that key resources, guidance, websites and course information were disseminated via Blackboard, our online course management system.[18]

EBL for English, then, seeks to refocus the attention of both teachers and students on the kinds of competencies that are required for particular tasks. What this means is that within defined parameters, students articulate and prioritise what they need to know, rather than these precepts arising in the process of reading and interpreting a series of texts whose relationships to one another may be based in epistemologies that first year students have yet to master adequately (e.g. periodisation, genre, theoretical concepts). As Smith suggests, such a method enables students to refocus on what difficulties might be encountered in the assimilation of a given topic, rather than de facto excluding these from discussion (p. 95). By assuming nothing about what students know, EBL creates opportunities to reassess what the subject English really is, and what kinds of competencies constitute it. This enables teachers to embed basic concepts, such as a sense of historical context, because students themselves identify that they lack knowledge of what was happening when, for example, *As You Like It* was written, or that there is an important social, moral and theatrical contexts for the phenomenon of the cross-dressed heroine. Students are given 'ownership' of their knowledge, rather than continually being confronted with information that is necessarily incomplete (because they lack conceptual frameworks for that information) and that comes gilded with the patina of an authority that they feel unable or unwilling to question. The notion that research skills are best imparted through passive rather than active learning is a thesis that is unproven, as our experience in the traditional mode was that students saw activities such as compiling bibliographies, acquiring good citation habits and learning how to use online databases as tasks that were ancillary to the criticism of the text. In this response, they were merely mirroring the relative priorities that we ourselves gave to these activities as we taught them to students.

By the end of their first year course, students need to be able to do a number of clearly defined things, and to have mastered a range of basic facts, for example, to be able to access a historical time-line, to understand what the notion of 'period' means and how it is conventionally applied (together with some reasons why periodisation might be problematic), to have some idea of the text as artefact, as material object and as part of a series of social, economic and political transactions. In terms of skills, we felt that instead of attempting to build on the foundations laid down in secondary school by continuing to use the traditional essay as our main mode of assessment that we in fact needed to dismantle acquired habits rather than reinforcing them, whilst simultaneously altering our expectations of what students should achieve. In effect, previously, we continued to ask the same questions in the same way and were then surprised/disappointed when our students struggled to differentiate school level work from university level work.[19] This meant designing problems that required students to replicate in their own terms the kinds of expectations, activities and protocols that

would be expected of any professional using literary materials for a defined end. Rather than starting off by thinking about which texts to include (or exclude), the EBL approach defines its curriculum by means of clearly articulated learning outcomes, which are in turn embedded in each problem, as the case study demonstrates.

EBL Case Study: Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

Because the Chaucer Problem was the first problem that the students took in the EBL suite of modules, there were a particular set of issues which had to be addressed at the design stage. First of all, it was essential to introduce students to the concept of EBL and the skills necessary for an effective and rewarding learning experience. In addition, the earliest English writer that most of our First Level students would have encountered prior to entering university was Shakespeare, therefore, introducing Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales* presented certain challenges in terms of language and cultural context. Finally, the Chaucer problem was only one of two problems in a module split between Medieval and Renaissance literature. In order to avoid a disjointed and fragmented module both problems focused on the dissemination and transmission of text and knowledge with particular emphasis on language and the process of interpretation. The incremental nature of the problems, in which students moved from a single set text in the initial Medieval section to a series of set plays from a single author in the Renaissance section, also provided a sense of learner autonomy which would prepare the students for the more open-ended problem of the EBL module in the second semester.

The learning objectives therefore were as follows:

- basic knowledge of the Medieval language and ability to read Middle English literature.

- basic understanding of the socio-historical context of the Late Middle Ages.

- basic familiarly with one of the key texts in the traditional canon of the Late Middle Ages.

- ability to read, research, evaluate, write on a literary topic.

- awareness of the fundamental skills involved in translation.

- ability to research, select and present a basic annotated bibliography

In the first tutorial, students were given the following **problem statement**:

Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* (1386 – 1400) in which a group of pilgrims tell stories as they make their way to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Beckett in Canterbury. Like many writers of the period, Chaucer describes the story-telling pilgrims in the opening section of the *Tales*, not as characters, but as ideal types that represent the various social groupings of the Late Middle Ages. The National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) is planning to introduce Chaucer to the syllabus in 2009. Your task is to nominate three of the pilgrim portraits from the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* for inclusion on a Leaving Cert. English syllabus and to present your choice to the NCCA.

Each group is asked to present a written report of 3,000 words to the NCCA in which you should:

1. state your choice of three portraits, giving line numbers and edition

2. explain your choice in terms of what they tell us about writing and reading in the Late Middle Ages as well as the cultural, political and religious issues of the period.

3. produce a short annotated bibliography to benefit teachers and students studying the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Each group will also

1. translate three of the pilgrim portraits into idiomatic Modern English and submit them with your report.

In addition, **each student** is asked to submit

1. suggestions for teaching the General Prologue to a group of 17 year old secondary students preparing for the Leaving Cert.

As noted earlier, a detailed set of guidelines to the problem were posted on Blackboard and included suggested methods of approach; aids to language acquisition; a guide to presentation; and a comprehensive list of resources.

The Chaucer problem was introduced in the first SGT and the project was submitted in class during the seventh week of the module. The landscape lectures specific to the Chaucer problem ran from week two to five inclusively. Week one was a general introduction to EBL methodology, to emphasise the differences between this module and their other English modules. The Chaucer lectures covered a wide range of social, cultural and historical material as well as equipping students with the basic principles of Medieval language. Keeping in mind the hybrid EBL model, the problem was assessed through a group project worth 20% and an individual assignment worth 10%. Chaucer's General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales and, more specifically, the Prologue's pilgrim portraits, were considered the most manageable units of text for those uninitiated in Middle English whilst providing enough colour, humour and literary interest to engage generalist first year students. We asked students to select three portraits rather than just one, so that the process of comparison would provide sufficient material for such students, given their very wide range of abilities, to engage fully with the task. Our broader purpose was to allow students to begin building the basic research skills necessary to become autonomous, competent researchers in any period, while at the same time providing them with enough exposure to Middle English language and literature to enable them to participate in any future modules they might take in Medieval studies. In addition, the problem was designed to draw on the students' familiarity with the education system from which they had emerged, where literature was often presented as established canon 'untainted' by human intervention. As they encountered the new material, it was intended that they would reflect upon the critical dynamics involved in selecting a limited number of texts from a wide range of possibilities. To this end, the students were asked to justify and explain their choice of portraits. The translation exercise, apart from the obvious need to deal with the unfamiliar language, opened up reflection on the difficulties inherent in reproducing a text from an aural, manuscript culture where the actual text, much less the meaning, can be a source of controversy. In a world where literature was dictated by or copied by hand from the author, a word

or phrase of a text could be changed, omitted or added, according to the taste or even skill of the copying scribe. The bibliography exercise, supported by in-class exercises in the SGTs, was an important stage in training students in discipline-specific skills, as well as asking them to evaluate the sources they used.

The individual element of the problem -- the lesson plan -- was intended to develop from and out of the group work. It offered students an opportunity to process knowledge beyond the classroom and to see how such knowledge might be applied in a practical situation. It was meant to be a creative exercise, most importantly, a form of play with newly acquired understanding as it were, and further opportunity to reflect on the processes involved in the transmission of knowledge. The end-of-term examination was designed so that only those who participated in the group work could do well. It sought to test three quite different, though equally necessary, skills: historical and cultural knowledge, through quiz-style questions; language, through a short translation; and analytical and discursive skills by a short essay-type response.

The problem was largely a success. Many of the students, to a greater or lesser degree emerged from the module with the core knowledge and skills described in the learning outcomes. The more dialogic, creative environment fostered by the EBL method meant that learner enthusiasm was high: students engaged quite quickly with the material and seemed to relish the autonomy and expectations placed upon them. 'It introduced us to Chaucer / Shakespeare in a completely different yet fun way', wrote one student of Literature in Context 1. Arguably, the problem can be viewed as being quite complex: persuading a committee from the National Council Curriculum *and* a group of teenagers on the value of studying Medieval literature is not one and the same task and some groups, for example, asked provocative and testing questions about the intended audience, wondering if they were aiming their arguments at their younger peers or at the board. However, such ambiguities sharpened the students' sense of the implications of varying interpretations and of the language registers appropriate to distinct audience groups. The dual audience demand addressed one of the key learning objectives: that students might come to understand why formal discourse is required in academic contexts, thus helping them to begin to identify the features that mark out such discourses. One difficulty arising from these multiple aims, however, was that the segmented nature of the work meant that students could work individually on various aspects of the problem without really synthesising the material as a group. This was obvious in the uneven nature of some of the projects submitted. Some students became too focussed on the general concept of a lesson plan and tended to produce generic outlines of how to approach a literary text, rather than specifically dealing with Chaucer. Others, however, responded much more creatively to the task, including examples on how to link the material to contemporary film and the striking, original suggestion from one student that the lesson could begin with a comparison of attending a contemporary music festival and the experience of participating in a pilgrimage of the Middle Ages. Fragmentation of effort was another difficulty, an issue that arose in both modules. This problem tended to derive from poor group management, however, rather than from design faults in the problems themselves. There were complaints from one or two groups, for example, about the uneven distribution and management of tasks because of repeated non-attendance of individual group members. UCD currently has no specific penalties for non-attendance, which poses particular difficulties for EBL delivery, potentially undermining the very real benefits – social and pedagogical – that arise from group work.

The value of showing how to approach a translation exercise was evident in the largely successful work produced on translation in the final exam. By including 'rough work' and thus the decision-making process in the submitted exam script, students were given a realistic understanding of the process involved in rendering Medieval poetry into Modern idiomatic English. This paradigm – to teach by example - will be adopted also for the landscape lectures, which, we have come to realise, need to be more tightly focussed on the pilgrim portraits. While many students found the social and cultural material exciting and intriguing, others struggled to apply such background knowledge to the specifics of the problem and were perplexed, at times, by the relevance of the material being covered in the weekly sessions. Modifying the lectures to refract social and cultural observations through the lens of a particular pilgrim portrait should enable them to see the relationship between text and context working in practice.

Despite these 'growing pains', by the end of the module, it was obvious that students had acquired a familiarity with the process and the tools necessary to study Middle English literature appropriate to Level 1. They could, for example, evaluate the difference between a JSTOR article and a less reliable web-site. The work produced was generally more engaged in the cultural and historical knowledge of the period than previously demonstrated in traditional First Year scripts. Library staff reported increased usage of library facilities, both physical and electronic. As the following discussion of student evaluation forms reveals, many students found group work difficult and were occasionally frustrated by the uneven participation of all group members. Many more commented on the value of sharing information and of making friends, emphasising the ease of making connections with peers more quickly than they had expected. The data gathered and analysed below provides crucial insight into the all aspects of curriculum change and indicates, we conclude, the value of introducing this particular method of teaching for large group humanities subjects such as English.

EBL: Student Evaluation and Analysis

This section analyses the grading profile and student evaluation questionnaires for Literature in Context 1 and 2 in its first year, and reflects only the first stage of a long-term review process. In 2008-09, 487 students were registered to Literature in Context 1 and 474 to Literature in Context 2: these were core modules for all students planning to continue English at Stage 2. But a majority of these students also opted to take the two option modules offered at Stage 1: 490 students were registered to Children's Literature in the first semester and 436 to Literary Genre in the second.[20]

An analysis of grade outcomes for all four modules is useful for comparing student performance in both traditional and EBL methods. The pass rate (A-D) for Literature in Context 1 (89.5%) is higher than for the other Stage 1 modules, but proportions are similar for Literature in Context 2 (85.2%) and the two traditional modules (84.1% for Children's Literature and 85.3% for Literary Genre). The number of students achieving B and C grades across the two types of module is similar overall, although proportionately more EBL students achieved B. The number of Bs in Literature in Context 1 and 2 was 40% and 37.7% respectively, producing an average across the year of 38.9%, while for Children's Literature and Literary Genre, the number of Bs was 31% and 26.4% respectively, or 28.7% on average. These statistics may reveal that group work improves the student's commitment and motivation: 'The group motivated me to work harder as it was not only for myself but for my teammates', revealed one respondent. Perhaps for the same reason, there were

also a lower proportion of D grades in the two EBL modules, with an average of 7.6% of students achieving D over the two modules. The traditional modules carried a higher proportion of D grades (15.3% overall), but the statistics were skewed by an uncharacteristically high proportion of D grades for Literary Genre (21.1% compared to 9.4% for Children's Literature). 'It makes mediocre students average', wrote one student of these modules, and it does seem that EBL methods might help weaker students to improve their grades. But this same student's follow-up observation, that EBL 'also makes good students average – you get pulled down while they get pulled up', is not supported by the statistics. It is true that Children's Literature yielded a higher proportion of A grades in the first semester, with 9.9% of students achieving A compared to 3.5% in Literature in Context 1 (see Figure 1). This may reflect the fact that EBL uses unfamiliar modes of assessment, whereas Children's Literature deploys the standard format of essay and examination, or it may point up that the material encountered in Literature in Context 1, Medieval and Renaissance, is not a central feature of the second-level curriculum, or it may indicate that students in EBL are forced to acquire new and different learning skills rather than continuing to apply what they have learned at school. The situation is reversed in the second semester, with 12.1% of students achieving As in Literature in Context 2 compared to 5.2% in Literary Genre, suggesting that students have processed and applied what they learned in Semester 1 in EBL. Averaged out over the year, then, the results are similar, with 7.6% of students in traditional modules and 7.8% in EBL achieving an A grade (see Figure 2). This suggests that EBL does not negatively affect the grades of stronger students and still allows them to thrive.

It is frequently the case that students who were high achievers in secondary school are taken aback by the fact that the skills needed there do not necessarily attract the same rewards at university. It became clear that group work provided a convenient scapegoat for complex feelings around expectation and reward. So while one student feared that EBL 'leaves open the possibility of receiving a poor grade through the failings of others', overall it seems that the reverse is true, with mixed ability groups helping weaker students to improve their work while allowing stronger students still to fulfil their potential. In fact, individual marks for high-achieving students were more or less equivalent across all four English modules.
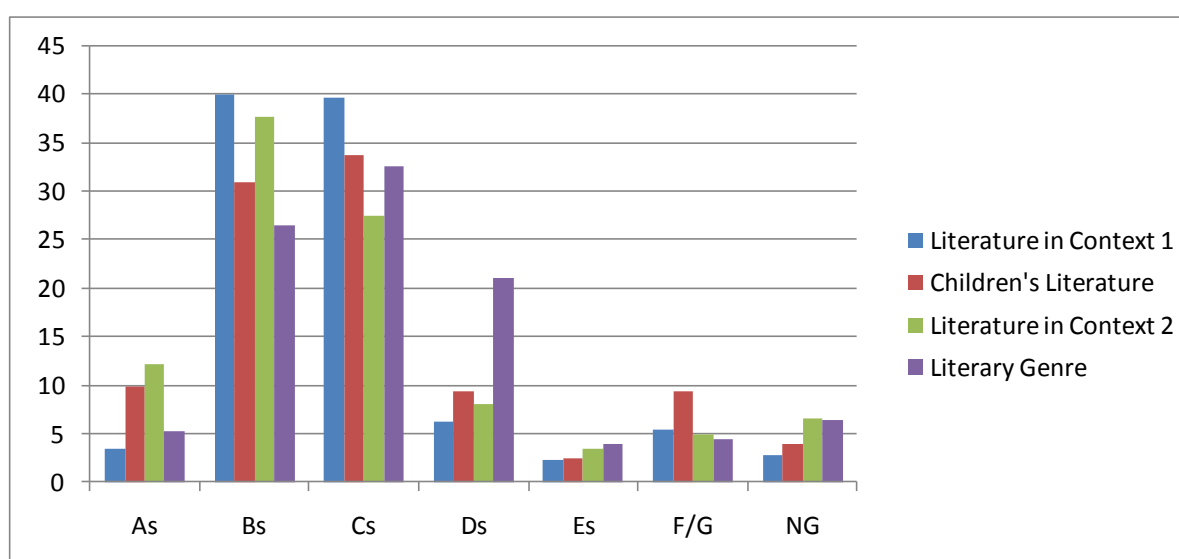
**Figure 1 Grade spread comparing the four English modules at first year**
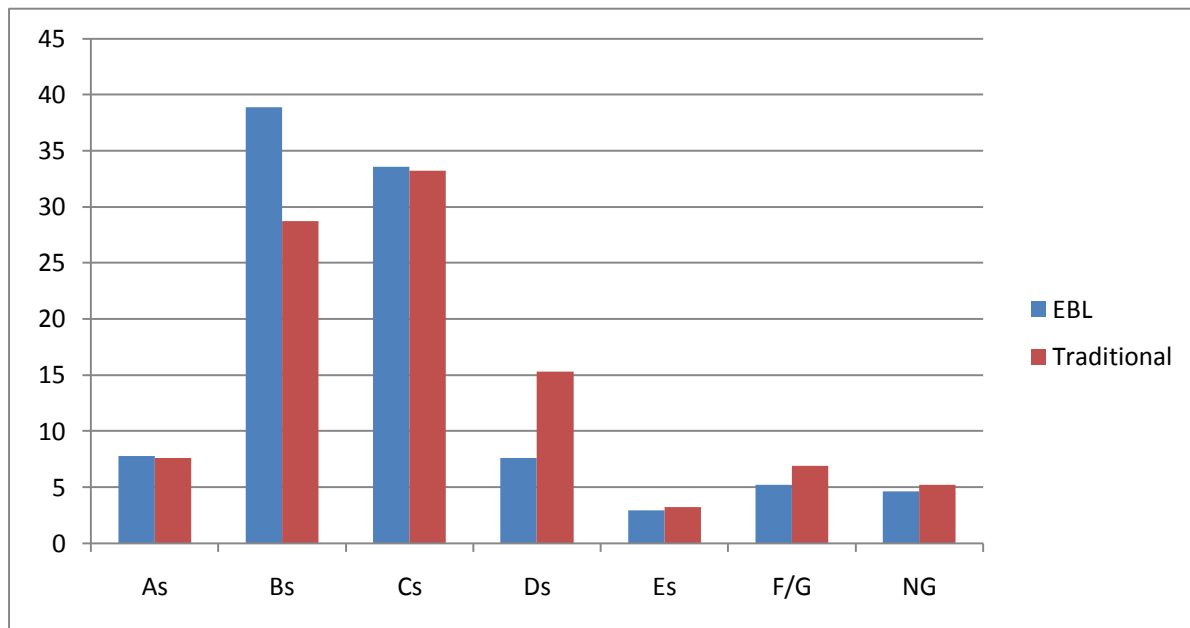
Figure 2 Grade spread comparing modules taught by EBL and traditional methods

The high pass rate for the two modules reflects students' achievement of the desired learning outcomes. Comments on the student evaluation questionnaires reveal their reflection on these accomplishments. Students 'learned...that context is important when studying writers', as one put it, and many commented on the significance of 'learning the different periods and the events and writers from each period'. One student commented that 'awareness of the significant political, social and religious issues opened up [the] texts', a sentiment that appeared with significant regularity in many of the questionnaires. Through this process, students began thinking about the process of canon formation, with one saying that s/he enjoyed 'thinking about what writers are important'. Some students suggested, of Literature in Context 1 in particular, that they would have liked to have worked more closely with language, yet many commented that their mastery of Chaucer's English was one of their key achievements in the module. These insights will be incorporated into the revised problems for 2009-2010.

Unsurprisingly, students were more divided on the issue of group work than any other aspect of the module. For Literature in Context 1 and 2 respectively, 53.6% and 48.1% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that 'group work facilitated my learning'. For students who enjoyed a positive experience with group work, peer support and the advantage of sharing ideas were cited as its key advantages. 'At the beginning I thought the assignments were too hard and like nothing I've done before but being in a group helped', wrote one student, while another added: 'The group work opened up new perspectives on the readings and also new approaches'. Many of the 25.3% and 29.9% of respondents in Literature in Context 1 and 2 respectively who disagreed or strongly disagreed (see Figure 3) identified group work as the module's key challenge. One student reflected the opinion of many others when s/he wrote that s/he 'did not find group work the easiest way to work. [I] would have worked much easier independently'. Problems were centred on group management, distribution of work and group grades. One student complained that 'some members were uncooperative and a lot of work was left up to certain individuals', while another revealed that 'groups are very difficult to organise and motivate – it gave me

leadership skills'. Still, the majority of respondents felt that they had developed team work skills through group work, a key learning outcome for these modules: 65.8% and 57.3% of respondents in Literature in Context 1 and 2 respectively agreed or strongly agreed.
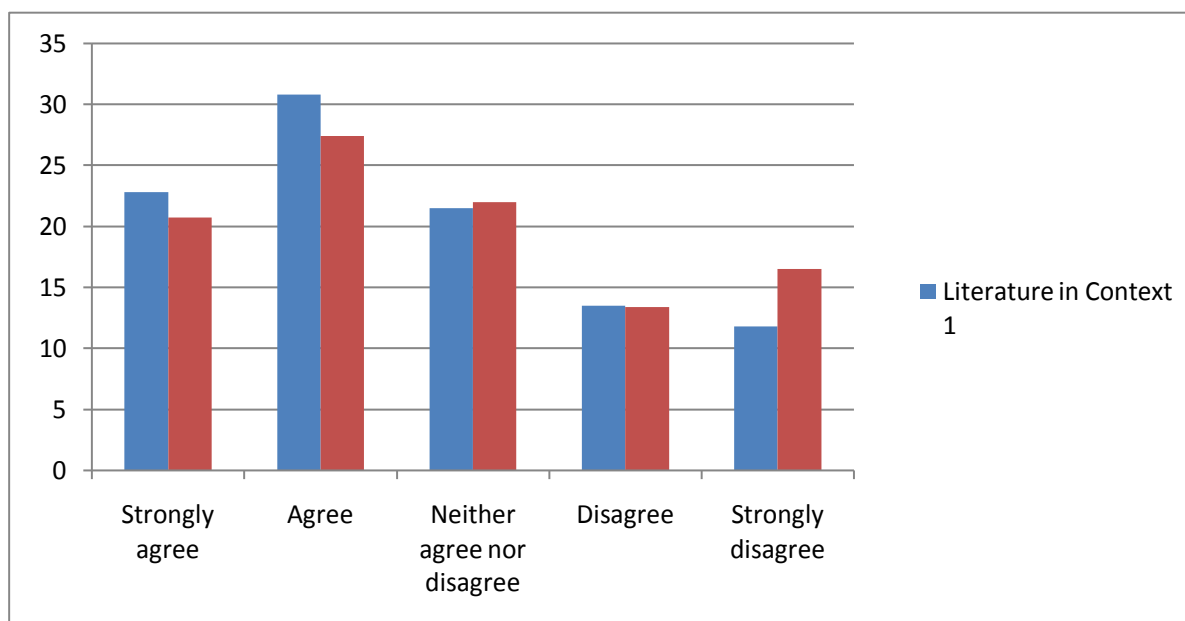
Figure 3 'The group work facilitated my learning'

Many students liked this student-centred approach to active learning, with one citing the advantage of 'giving the student [themselves] the chance to work'. For 75.9% and 82.3% of respondents in Literature in Context 1 and 2 respectively, the modules played a key role in helping students develop skills and confidence to pursue independent research (as Figure 4 shows). Commending the module's 'encouragement of research', one student wrote: 'Many materials provided directed us in a myriad of directions. It was very interesting to take charge of our own specific areas and elaborate on these by researching different points of view'. Another pointed out that the modules 'focused on different periods of work that specifically required you to research and specialise, giving you the much needed basic knowledge'. 'It gave us freedom [i]n our researches and prompt[ed] us to seek information from various sources', wrote another. According to one student, 'the library was a key element within the project, '[a]s we were required to use it extensively, particularly concerning Chaucer, we had to get to grips with it fairly quickly'. This comment tallies with the statistical evidence for both modules. At the end of Literature in Context 1, 91% of respondents claimed they knew how to access the library catalogue to find a book; this rose to 96.9% at the end of Literature in Context 2. When they finished the first semester, 69.1% of respondents were able to find databases relevant to the study of English, and 69.5% were able to use JSTOR; this rose to 87.6% and 79.1% respectively by the end of the second semester. This is a massive achievement for our Stage 1 students, and bears out our initial hope that EBL would equip students with both skills <u>and</u> knowledge, thus laying solid foundations for future study.
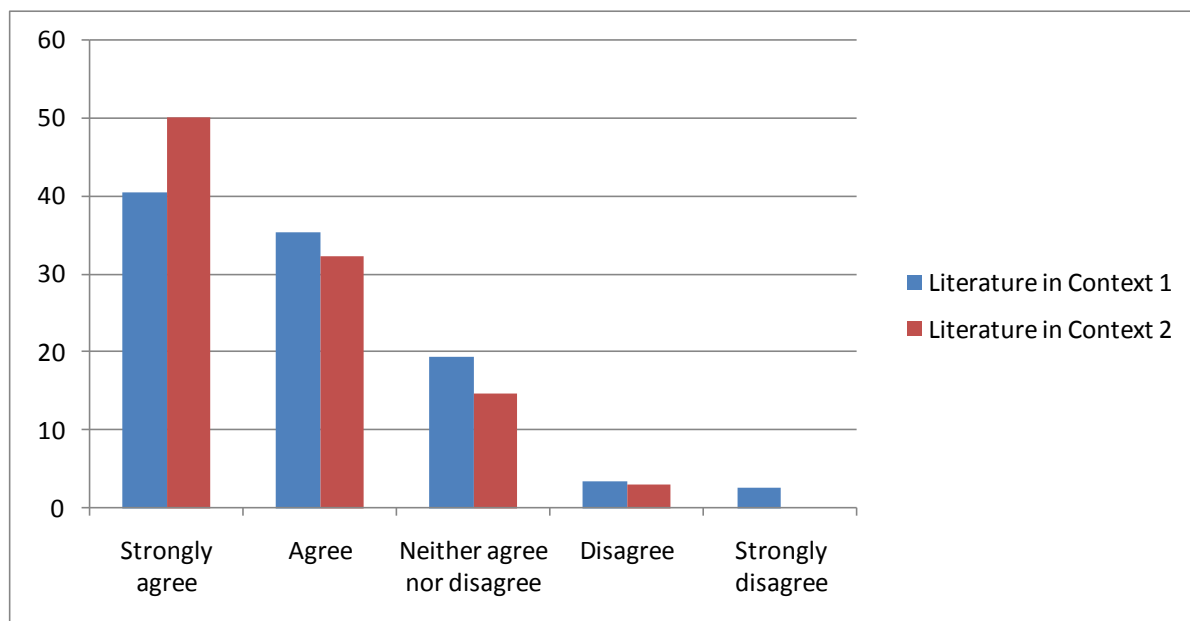
Figure 4 'I am confident that I can pursue independent research'

The continued importance of the SGT leader (tutor/facilitator) in EBL modules was abundantly demonstrated throughout the questionnaires. 'My SGT leader was supportive, encouraging and enthusiastic' agreed or strongly agreed 75.1% and 87.2% of respondents in Literature in Context 1 and 2 respectively. These statistics reveal not only the high regard in which our tutors were held, but also the central role that SGT leaders play in these modules. 'The tutorials were very helpful as my tutor knew a lot about the subject and helped to make sense of everything', wrote one student. Another praised a 'fantastic' tutor who 'gave great feedback and lots of help and support for my group'. In Literature in Context 1 and 2 respectively, 53.6% and 61% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the modules eased the transition into third-level study, which was another of our key motivations in redesigning the first-year curriculum. According to one respondent, they 'helped us to settle into third level education quicker by making friends'. Many others noted that 'the group work helped me make friends', and our student advisors provide much anecdotal evidence on this very positive aspect, unprecedented for English at Stage 1. In terms of group identification, 55.3% of the respondents in Literature in Context 1, rising to 67% in Literature in Context 2, agreed or strongly agreed that they identified as a student of English. The relatively high number of respondents in both modules who neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (27.4% and 26.8% respectively) may indicate the number of Arts students in UCD who did not intend to take English after first year, and who would not have seem themselves as a 'student of English' anyway, as discussed earlier.

Summarising the benefits of the two EBL modules, one student wrote: 'It was [an] interesting and insightful experience but a major strength was that it improved my research, analytical and teamwork skills'. Another student's observation that the modules provided 'good ground work for future study in the School of English' chimed with the experiences of a majority of respondents. In the first semester 64.6% agreed or strongly agreed, and this rose to 75.6% in the second semester as students started to look forward to Stage 2. 'Helping you to do independent research which

will be beneficial in other modules', as one student put it, was cited as a key strength of the module. We see it as imperative that these skills are built upon at Stage 2.

Conclusion

Both the knowledge and the skills required for university study of English can be applied to simulacra of real-life situations – the kinds of tasks and consultation that academics might undertake outside the academy, based upon their expertise in a given area. For example, advising a government department or examination board on key content and skills for the school curriculum, devising promotional materials for a cultural institution, or developing an idea for a TV or radio series designed to bring poetry to public attention. Such scenarios might arise from non-academic contexts, yet in order to attempt to provide solutions to such problems, students must turn to a series of traditional skills, and attempt to replicate the kind of deep knowledge of a field or period that enables creativity and innovation. Whilst the process of learning is driven by <u>form</u> (the given scenario, schematised into the set problems), we continue to work to ensure that what is learned is characterised by deep learning, the application of key skills, and objectively verifiable knowledge. Overall, the students have emerged from both modules with a greater ability to evaluate. One of the key tasks in the years ahead is to make these EBL students realise, use and synthesise all that they have learned. The number of students who have registered to the degree cycle as Stage 2 English majors has increased by 12% this year (August 2009). This provides us with continuing challenges to respond to the needs of this first group of EBL-trained students, while providing positive indication of students' increased sense of engagement with the subject.

Endnotes:

[1] We would like to thank the following for their support for this project: Terry Barrett, Joe Brady, Ursula Byrne, Nick Daly, Mary Daly, Lorna Dodds, Evelyn Flanagan, Valerie Kendlin, Philip Nolan, Karen O'Rourke, and Bairbre Redmond. Financial support for training and resources was generously provided by the UCD Centre for Teaching and Learning, the School of English, Drama and Film, and by a Module Development Support Grant awarded under the auspices of The Registrar.
[2] Shannon L. Reed and Kirilke Stavreva, 'Layering Knowledge: Information Literacy as Critical Thinking in the Literature Classroom', *Pedagogy* 6 (2006), 435-52 (p. 439).
[3] Bill Hutchings and Karen O'Rourke, 'Problem-Based Learning in Literary Studies', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Educatio*n 1 (2002), 73-83 (p. 74). For a useful definition of what EBL is, see p. 78. On the distinction between EBL and PBL see Geraldine O'Neill and Ivan Moore, 'Strategies for Implementing Group work in Large Classes: Lessons from EBL', in *Emerging Issues II: The Changing Roles and Identities of Teachers and Learners in Higher Education*, ed. by Bettie Higgs and Marian McCarthy (Cork: NAIRTL, 2008), 75-88 (pp. 76-77).
[4] Karen M. Cardozo, 'At the Museum of Natural Theory: The Experiential Syllabus (or, What Happens When Students Act Like Professors)', *Pedagogy* 6 (2006), 405-33 (p. 409).
[5] Most students entering university have taken six subjects for their Leaving Certificate, all at higher level. Points acquired per grade are as following: A1, higher level = 100; A2 =90 and so on, as in the UCAS university admissions system, although grades have different values. The 360 points required for entry into the BA programme is roughly equivalent to 2 Bs and a C at A-Level. A 'B' grade is recommended for all students considering taking English at third-level but a pass grade in English is deemed sufficient. University places for Irish students are almost all assigned via the CAO points system. For full details see <http://www2.cao.ie/app_scoring/lcegrid.htm> [accessed 14 July 2009]. Exceptions to this process are mature student applicants (23+ years old).
[6] Jim Slevin, former president of the Royal Irish Academy, in John Downes, 'The Dumbing down of the Leaving Cert', *Sunday Tribune* (July 12 2009) <http://www.tribune.ie/article/2009/feb/01/a-up-the-dumbing-down-of-the-leaving-cert/> [accessed 13 July 2009]. Slevin's phrase 'shallow learning'

echoes the more commonly used term 'surface learning', summarised by Chinthaka Damith Balasooriya, Christopher Hughes and Susan Tooher, 'Impact of a new integrated medicine program on students' approaches to learning', *Higher Education Research and Development* 28 (2009), 289-302, p. 291. The Australian second-level programme that determines access to third-level education closely resembles the Irish system, and tends to produce students who are 'very comfortable with being told exactly what to learn' (p. 296). On 'surface' versus 'deep' learning, see Velda McCune and Noel Entwistle, 'The deep approach to learning: Analytical abstraction and idiosyncratic development', Paper presented at the Innovations in Higher Education conference, Helsinki 2000 available at <http://www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk/docs/mccune2000.pdf> [accessed 9 July 2009].

[7] This is the European Credit Transfer System as determined by the Bologna Agreement. A summary can be found at http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ects/guide_en.pdf [accessed 8 August 2009]. 1 ECTS equates to 25-30 hours work (p. 16).

[8] Statistics for 2006 indicate that 11.3% of Arts students at Stage 1 were in the top points range (550+ points) while 49.3% of Stage 1 medicine students were in this category. See HEA Report on High Point Entrants 'Discipline choices and Trends for High Points CAO Acceptors 2006' (2007) available at <http://www.hea.ie/files/files/file/HEA_HighPoints_WEBFINAL.pdf > [accessed 9 July 2009].

[9] Since modularisation in 2005, approx 500 students register each year to at least 10 credits of English at Stage 1; between 270-300 students continue to Stage 2 English to complete their degree in English as minor (20 ECTS), joint major (25 ECTS), 30-credit major or single major students. Around 200 Stage 1 students choose to drop English after their first year to specialise in other subjects.

[10] O'Neill and Moore, p.75.

[11] On the four key benefits of group work (intellectual, social, personal and practical) see Greg Light and Roy Cox, *Learning and teaching in Higher Education: The Reflective Professional* (London: Sage, 2001).

[12] P. Kahn and K. O'Rourke, 'Understanding Enquiry-Based Learning', *Handbook of Enquiry and Problem-Based Learning* (2005) 1-12.

[13] See Ruth Taylor, 'Creating a connection: tackling student attrition through curriculum development', *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 29 (2005), 367-74 for an example of how some of the problems that lead to student drop-out can be addressed though curriculum design.

[14] In both modules, the individual components comprise 60% of the overall grade, 40% for end-of-semester examination; 20% for individual assignments such as bibliographical exercises and reading journals. The problems were designed to ensure that students could typically only excel at the individual components if they participated fully in the group projects (40% of the total grade in each module).

[15] The so-called 'guide on the side' rather than the 'sage on the stage' method. See O'Neill and Moore, pp. 82-83.

[16] For a spirited defence of the value of the large-group lecture as an active and effective teaching and learning method, see Daniel Richardson's brief account 'Don't dump the didactic lecture; fix it' in *Advances in Physiology Education* 32 (2008), 23-24.

[17] Keverne Smith, 'School to University: Sunlit steps, or stumbling in the dark?' *AHHE* 90 (2003), 90-98, p. 92. See further, the section on student feedback, pp. 16-24.

[18] Most students did not use this resource to the extent that we had hoped, tending to see it as a repository for information, rather than as an interactive source of guidance on resources. This may reflect their inexperience with such systems, or their experience with other modules.

[19] For more on managing this transition, see Smith, op. cit., and Gillian Ballinger, 'Bridging the Gap between A Level and Degree: Some observations on managing the transitional stage in the study of English Literature', *AHHE* 2 (2002), 99-109.

[20] Students were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements based around module design and organisation, group work, the role of lectures and SGTs, usefulness of resources, and skills developed. There were also questions relating to Blackboard (UCD's e-learning environment) and the library. Students were also given the opportunity to comment broadly on difficulties encountered during the module and its strengths, as well as offer suggestions for improvement. Distributed in the last lecture of each module, Literature in Context 1 had 237 respondents, so just under half (or 48.7%) of registered students, while there were 164 respondents for Literature in Context 2, constituting just over a third (or 34.6%) of registered students.

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