

GCE English Language and Literature

Case Study 2

Sir Christopher Hatton School

Unit 4 Coursework

Presenting the World

Edexcel is grateful to the staff and students for their collaboration in supplying guidance and examples of student work



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Introduction

Sir Christopher Hatton School is an over subscribed mixed Foundation School with Specialist Maths and Computing Status that has upwards of 1200 students. It is situated in East Anglia in a town with a population of about 70,000. The school enjoys a very good reputation in the local area and at GCSE level in 2010 61% students achieved 5 or more GCSEs including English and Mathematics and 84% achieved 5 or more GCSEs at grade C or above.

The sixth form has been expanding over recent years and now has upwards of two hundred students on role. It offers a broad range of subjects from the more traditional A Levels to vocational awards and many of the students go on to Higher Education following on from their sixth form studies. From the last two year's cohort of students taking English Language and Literature a number have gone on to study degrees in English, Marketing, Law and other Humanities related subjects.

In the English department we have been offering GCE English Language and Literature as well as English Literature for a number of years. In English Language and Literature we made the switch to Edexcel in 2008 when the new specifications were introduced as the course offered a wide variety of choice and flexibility in terms of the texts and approaches that could be adopted. In particular the continuing opportunity to offer units that allowed creative writing were important to us as that was one of the key areas that has always attracted students to the course. We currently have fourteen students in our Year 13 teaching group (4 males and 10 females) and in Year 12 we have sixteen students (7 males and 9 females). Traditionally English Literature at A Level has sometimes, mistakenly, been seen as a more "female" subject and we have observed an

increased uptake of males opting for the English Language and Literature course. This is in no small measure down to the option of creative writing that is available in the coursework.

Teaching Unit 4

The approach that we take to Unit 4 is that we begin work straight after AS examinations have finished in June. It is important not to lose the impetus of study and so we focus on a number of key areas. We are usually a team of two delivering the AS course and so we divide the teaching between us. One teacher will introduce students to a substantial text that they could use as a key stimulus text for several areas of study – in our case we teach “Twelfth Night” because we feel that is important for students to study a play by Shakespeare and because it offers a way into many areas of study. For example students can look at celebration, grief, love, a personal moment, family relationships and even the idea of travel writing could all originate from this text.

The other teacher will work on a programme of wider reading with the students as well as exploring and teaching diverse writing styles and genre. Students will be expected to research an area of study or a theme in some depth and to read around that area in order to produce a presentation to the group by the end of the summer term. This then allows for some further reading over the summer holiday which can then be developed.

In September, when students return the expectation is that they will narrow down their focus and decide upon an area of study. The assessment criteria are shared with students at every step of the process and we also use the sample folders that are available on the Edexcel website, although the latter not until students are well into the process in order not to overly influence a choice of topic or approach. They choose a key substantial stimulus text that may or may not be the one delivered in class, and a programme of wider reading. They then make their choices about the pieces of writing that they will undertake. This is supported by the teacher who will lead and facilitate those decisions in discussion, negotiation and liaison where necessary with the exam board if there are questions over the appropriateness of a task.

We try to encourage students to make individual choices over their area of study, texts and pieces of literary and non-literary writing as it is essential that they can show independence in their research and writing. The outcomes are much better if the students are making their own choices as they are more motivated and enthusiastic if they are engaged and interested in the texts. It does mean that the teacher needs a high level of organisation, especially given the size of group we have, to keep track of what is being studied and a programme of 1-1 tutorials run throughout the lessons with careful logging and tracking, making use of the editorial features on MS Word.

Students work on their coursework pieces, planning, drafting and re-drafting in lessons as well as part of their home study. They also undertake significant peer support, and are expected to share their work as “professional writers” would in a workshop type environment. Auxiliary tasks are given to the students to ensure that they have engaged with the genre of their pieces as well as the bias and voice. For example: they are asked to write a fact file on their literary protagonist and then use elements of this to create believable and engaging three dimensional characters.

Tasks that work well

We find that a variety of tasks work effectively.

Last year for example one student took the topic of Crossing Boundaries, her stimulus text was Andrea Levy's "Small Island" and she wrote a fictional piece about the experience of a small girl emigrating from Barbados. Her non-literary piece took the style model of the "Relative Values" column in "The Sunday Times" and she wrote about her own mother's experience of moving from Barbados to England in the 1960s. It was successful because it was written from personal interest and experience as well as having a very tight style and structure. She also made every effective use of accent and dialect within her writing. There was also ample opportunity for wider reading and research.

Another student took the topic of Grief as her area of study. She read "The Lovely Bones" and was also advised to read "Wuthering Heights" and a range of poetry as well as non-fiction as part of her wider reading. Her literary piece was a powerful short story which took "The Lovely Bones" as a style model in which she wrote a first person narrative following a car crash talking to the surviving partner in a relationship. Her non-literary unit was an article on the topic of teenage suicide, handled with sensitivity and tact.

This year a student has used *Animal Farm* by Orwell to develop a short story set in an office with a satirical take on 'office politics' and a wider social message about the monotony of such an existence. Another student is using 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' to develop a short story based on the patients of a mental institution revolting against the doctors who operate on them as well as a broadsheet article based on journalist spending time in a mental institution. A third has taken *World War Z* by Max Brooks and developed an article about war-profiteering throughout the large wars in the 20th Century and into the 21st Century.

Other tasks that have worked well include an epistolary style novel opening, tabloid newspaper articles, short stories, journalistic style interviews and real-life profiles.

Writing the Evaluative Commentary

Again the assessment criteria are shared with the students from an early stage in order to ensure that they are focused on the outcomes that are required. Students are encouraged to keep ongoing notes and records of the reading, resources, websites and any other materials that they have been engaging with in order to facilitate both the commentary and the bibliography that is required. We find that the evaluation is more effective if it is completed alongside the creative process, although the final sections and comparative elements will need to be drafted towards the end of the process. Students are given suggested checklists of what might be included as well as exemplar commentaries to assess against the criteria before they complete their final drafts of their own commentaries.

Conclusion

We have found Unit 4 to be an interesting and stimulating unit to deliver and assess from a teaching perspective. The diversity of responses from the students and the range of reading and study that it promotes, encourages a high level of literary and linguistic analysis as well as the evaluative and analytical skills that show the synoptic skills required.

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Commentary from Mary Jay Chief Examiner

This is a very well managed A2 coursework programme. Despite the relatively large teaching groups, students are given as much freedom as possible in their choices of texts, stimulus materials and writing outcomes. The planning and teaching is clearly very well co-ordinated to ensure effective delivery of the programme.

The centre identifies the importance of using the key period after the AS examinations, giving students the opportunity to carry out some research and make a presentation before the end of term, thus establishing key principles of the unit, which are independent study and sharing ideas with peers. Introducing the unit in June allows students time to read their core text and collect other stimulus material before the start of the A2 year and creates a good foundation for the more intensive study when they will be refining their area of investigation and concentrating on the production of the creative tasks. The centre has carefully considered the choice of core text to allow maximum flexibility; the choice of 'Twelfth Night' being an excellent example of how one robust and multi-layered text can be a springboard for a diversity of themes and ideas. Students are also given helpful advice over their individual choices of stimulus literary texts eg, the suggestion that the contemporary novel 'The Lucky Bones' would be enhanced by pairing with a classic fiction text. Efforts have been made to ensure that students are given a rich 'diet' of literary texts as well as being encouraged to read an extensive range of non-fiction material in different genres.

Editing, drafting and writing the critical commentary are all taken seriously and regarded as integral parts of the coursework process. The centre has successfully exploited the opportunities for flexibility and individuality that are offered by this unit to generate enthusiasm and to provide students with the skills needed to manage their own learning.

Successful delivery of the unit led to the production of original and engaging work and has been a useful method for the department to address the gender disparity in students taking A level English courses.