

Democracy in English Education: The Future of the English PhD

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In their 2016 edited volume of essays, *The Academic Book of the Future*, Rebecca E. Lyons and Samantha J. Rayner explain that Academic Book Week (9-16 November 2015) was the ‘mid-point’ of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and The British Library collaboration, which aimed to investigate the academic book of the future (2).ⁱ In early 2014, the AHRC partnered with The British Library and called for teams to mobilise the two-year initiative, with the stated aim ‘to explore the future of the academic book in the context of Open Access publishing and the digital revolution’ (2). As a government-funded research project, *The Academic Book of the Future* engages practice-led research, particularly in the publishing industry, alongside conceptual exploration into areas of thought largely (but not exclusively) associated with the nature of digital humanities.

It was in this marginal space of alternative angles on the overarching topic that Samantha Rayner and I conceived of *The Future of the English PhD*: a one-day workshop for doctoral students undertaking PhDs in English and Creative Writing disciplines. The premise of the day (held at De Montfort University on 12 November 2015, during Academic Book Week) was that consideration of the academic book of the future could not be complete unless the training of those who will write such books is examined. Finding strong resonances with my ongoing research utilising material in the field of English education, I framed the workshop as attending specifically to English and a variety of challenges and preoccupations circulating the discipline at the moment.

Four areas of conversation were delineated and articulated with the help of invited speakers (see below): (1) the role of Higher Education (HE) in society; (2) contemporary

movement towards creative-critical synergies in English studies; (3) the challenges of the Research Exercise Framework (REF) and the perspective of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on innovation in English; and (4) the climate in academic publishing regarding demand for innovative material from former English PhD students. These conversational nodes were designed to elicit the most comprehensive (though by no means exhaustive) thematic vision from current English PhD students, who were invited to come to the workshop as active delegates with hopes and fears, opinions, and experiences which were welcomed into the open in an honest and exploratory fashion. The end-goal of the event was to collate an articulation of concerns for further attention and suggestions for change in the status quo of doctoral studies in English and Creative Writing.

This political angle was important. Undergirding my vision of The Future of the English PhD from the beginning has been the work of the American literary theorist and educator, Louise M. Rosenblatt (1904-2005), and her determined belief in the importance of nurturing democratic attitudes and practices, not only in literary studies, but more broadly in people and institutions at large.ⁱⁱ Before I communicate the findings of the workshop and proceed to discuss these, it is to Rosenblatt and the research context for this initiative that I turn now.

Research Context

That Louise Rosenblatt, now widely recognised as a pioneer in English education, was an American, is significant. The U.S. houses organisations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and its Conference on English Education (CEE) – a powerhouse of activity and publishing on matters relating to English education at all levels, and which draws contributions from academics employed in English education departments across the country.

In the U.K. however, pedagogical matters in English tend to appear as a stream in literary theory, with Ben Knights, Chris Thurgar-Dawson, Carol Atherton, Robert Eaglestone,

and Peter Barry among the leading British scholars who have published on pedagogy in English since the turn of the millennium. Queen Mary University of London's The Art of English conference in 2013 was a milestone in the development of reflection on HE-level English education in the U.K., drawing together academics from other areas in English studies under a common banner of pedagogy.ⁱⁱⁱ In gathering together the various activities that can be subsumed under the discipline of English education, however, the danger is that they appear as a naturally coalescing mass of interest-points. The reality is that, in spite of difficulties English educationalists have faced in the U.S. (feeling they are not listened to by English scholars), they are ahead of the British in stimulating organised thought on topics such as: the teaching of English at all educational levels; concepts of learning through literary study; the relationship between literary methods and approaches and their pedagogical implications; the politics of learning and teaching styles in English; and reflection on the nature of English education as a discipline in its own right yet with an intimate relationship to literary study.^{iv}

As a founding mother of English education in the U.S., Louise Rosenblatt has been urged upon the attentions of literary scholars by successive English educationalists and some rare literary scholars. Wayne C. Booth, for example, offered a preface for the fifth edition of Rosenblatt's seminal text, *Literature as Exploration* in 1995, in which he recognised that she had been 'absurdly neglected' by 'the world of literary criticism' (vii). He cautioned against the dangers of reading her work 'as relevant only or mainly to primary and secondary teaching', and draws attention to the political commitment at the heart of her thesis on literary study as a mode of exploration into human relations (xiii). Committed to democracy, from as early as the 1920s to as recently as the 2000s, Rosenblatt not only framed literary study as a highway to democratic vistas (to echo Walt Whitman, a hero of Rosenblatt's) but also to thinking about learning and teaching in literary study. Although an American who worked and is now read

largely in an American context, I believe that Rosenblatt's commitment to democracy and how she manifested this commitment is just as pertinent in a contemporary British context.

On 20 September 2001 at the Great Women Scholars Forum in New York City, Rosenblatt, along with the philosopher of education and activist, Maxine Greene (1917-2014), and the literacy theorist Yetta Goodman (b. 1931), talked to an audience reeling after the events of 9/11. With a 'new war situation' on the horizon, Rosenblatt turned once again to the ideas of 'mutual aid' originally set forth by Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) in *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902), and that had been instilled in her as a girl by her Russian immigrant father, Samuel:

Mutual aid, my father's whole point was that the struggle for survival was not the only thing that happened in evolution. There was mutual aid. There was cooperation. There was care and fidelity among animals as well as among humans.

According to Rosenblatt, a democracy requires individuals to subordinate self-interest to the creation of a society in which individuals can flourish. As an undergraduate at Barnard College in the early 1920s and the aftermath of the First World War, she wrote for *The Barnard Bulletin* as editor that 'students of the world' must cooperate to create a 'community of interest and active friendship' (23 November 1923). Conceiving Barnard as a microcosm of a larger society, Rosenblatt argued that HE should seek to help students connect their learning to life beyond the university:

Let us make more definite the idea that college is a place in which every member of the community is attempting to understand life, to interpret it in terms of the information and experience which he acquires, in order that he may play a better part when he becomes an active unit in society. 'To understand life' – vague, general, perhaps, but broad enough to include all types of personality, interested in all phases of human activity, and worthy enough to induce into the college community the much-needed spirit of a common purpose, of enthusiasm for the experiences which it offers. (1 June 1923)

United therefore as part of a 'common enterprise' engaged with real life, students would discover that they can cooperate with others in the pursuit of their own interests. As she said in

1982, in order for individuals to be able to ‘develop freely and fully’, a coherent social infrastructure needs to be continually questioned and revised by a praxis of mutual aid (3). Students should be encouraged to develop attitudes of selection, to cultivate new ways of thinking and living so that society develops instead of stagnating: so that it nurtures the most hospitable conditions possible for human flourishing.

Writing and publishing was one way of getting this message across for Rosenblatt. But she also served on committees, spoke at conferences, implemented innovative curriculum design, and assumed the role of an activist, calling especially for changes to the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act.^v What we can take from Rosenblatt’s example today is recognition that, in some circumstances, more is required to establish the need for (and effect) change, than simply writing for a select audience as academics to other academics. The Academic Book of the Future, and in particular, *The Future of the English PhD*, is founded on a similar assumption that change occurs through interpersonal, face-to-face meeting and discussion in addition to writing, and that the status quo is something that can, and should be, addressed by students under its aegis as well as by professors and management at the helm.

The Future of the English PhD through Four Lenses

Inciting us to a revolution, Emeritus Reader and philosopher of science at University College London (UCL), Nicholas Maxwell, framed the conversation by questioning the fundamental role of HE and universities in twenty-first-century society. Since his landmark book, *From Knowledge to Wisdom: A Revolution for Science and the Humanities* (1984), Maxwell has been campaigning for change in the aims and methods of academic inquiry in a manner redolent of Rosenblatt, including founding the network, Friends of Wisdom.^{vi} His most recent work on this subject, *How Universities Can Help Create a Wiser World: The Urgent Need for an Academic Revolution* (2014) spells out the situation with concise clarity.

The central idea is that presently, universities tend to pursue ‘knowledge inquiry’ (8). This educational paradigm sets the acquisition of ‘knowledge and technological know-how’ as its principal goal (8). Only after this has been achieved can knowledge be applied ‘to help solve social problems’ (8). The essential problem with this, argues Maxwell, is that knowledge-inquiry is driven by a need to expand knowledge rather than understand and solve problems of living – a difference in aims that can lead to a gulf characterised by irrational irrelevance. This is a deficiency inherited from French Enlightenment *philosophes* who, attempting to understand social phenomena, misapplied the aims and methods of natural science to social inquiry (9-10). What is needed therefore is to retrace our steps and recover what went wrong in the eighteenth century. This would involve developing a paradigm of ‘wisdom-inquiry’ of two component parts:

(1) to articulate, and seek to improve the articulation of, our problems of living, and (2) to propose and critically assess possible solutions, from the standpoint of their practicality and desirability. (27)

Academia becomes a ‘kind of people’s civil service, doing openly for the public what actual civil services are supposed to do in secret for governments’ (37). Maxwell defends himself from criticisms of ignoring ‘knowledge for its own sake’ by re-conceptualising what knowledge is:

Even though the aim of [knowledge] inquiry may, officially, be *human* knowledge, the personal and social dimension of this is all too easily lost sight of, and progress in knowledge is conceived of in impersonal terms, stored lifelessly in books and journals. (41, original emphasis)

What Maxwell seems to be pinpointing is a sense of something missing in universities, of aims gone awry. PhD students must currently define their research aims as making a significant, original contribution to knowledge. Early career researchers, meanwhile, seek to carve for themselves a niche in a specialised field, from which they can become more established and respected. The expansiveness suggestive in Maxwell’s calls for contributions to problems of living, therefore, would seem somewhat out of place on an English PhD

proposal. And yet, as we shall see, the pressure to define research outcomes in terms of impact levels calls us back to the question of the value of an English PhD beyond the academy.

At a recent Policy Engagement Training programme run by the AHRC Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) Midlands3Cities (M3C) and White Rose College of Arts and Humanities (WRCoAH), it was abundantly clear that as one form of ‘impact’, policy engagement requires a reversal of the usual academic paradigm Maxwell defines as ‘knowledge inquiry’. Instead of knowledge being formulated and then applied to problems, policy engagement requires PhD students and researchers first to become attuned to ‘problems of living’ in the political arena, and then to work out how these problems can be addressed through their own research. As the next generation of researchers, Maxwell challenges us to think about the fundamental assumptions of a PhD education in our discipline: is ‘knowledge-inquiry’ enough?

Also taking risks in moving beyond the status quo, Professor John Schad (Lancaster University) moved the focus to thinking about creative-critical synergies in English studies. Addressing an audience partly composed of Creative Writing PhD students, Schad’s example as a critic who has steadily integrated more creative approaches to his criticism was very welcome. Having begun his academic career as a Victorianist sympathetic to deconstruction, Schad has since built for himself a profile as a theorist, scholar, and critic who is not afraid to move between genres to reflect on his experiences as a reader of writing, where life beyond the page frequently interrupts, diverges, and moulds the nature of the ‘text’ being read.^{vii} As a ‘movement’, articulation of creative criticism is appearing in books such as *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide* (2014), edited by Stephen Benson and Clare Connors, in journals such as *EROS* and *Writing From Below*, and in PhD programmes such as UCL’s PhD in Creative Critical Writing.

But because creative criticism mixes genres and borrows instincts from wherever the critic sees fit, practitioners of this mode of writing, ‘in terms of intellectual property laws, are something like burglars’ (34). Benson and Connors explain:

The merest step away from convention in critical writing is liable to generate anxiety on the part of the critic; this is unavoidable, and, yes, it can be an unsettling experience, especially within the context of an institution dependent for its status and continuance on the tacit acceptance of normative protocol. (34)

If, as Maxwell says, the fundamental aim of English studies as a contemporary academic discipline in higher education is to advance knowledge, then the ‘merest step away from convention in critical writing’ can justifiably be called into question: writing is restricted as the handmaiden of knowledge communication. But if practitioners of English studies begin to conceive of themselves as first and foremost engaging with ‘problems of living’, the criteria for defining what Anthony Cond in *The Academic Book of the Future* calls ‘credentialisation’ can surely be adjusted accordingly (43). What Schad and other advocates of creative criticism need to take into account, therefore, is that more flexible genres for communicating research in English can be negotiated only in line with consistent general guidelines for what academic inquiry is trying to achieve in the first place. In other words: the credentials of creative criticism can only be assured if the infrastructure is in place to support it in the form of a revised vision of what English studies are ‘for’ as part of a society’s HE system.

Offering their contributions in concert, Ben Johnson (Research Policy Adviser at HEFCE) and Ben Doyle (Commissioning Editor for Literature) from Palgrave, confronted credentialisation head-on by turning the spotlight on REF and publishing platforms for English scholars.^{viii} In his guide to ‘REF and PhDs’, written especially for *The Future of the English PhD*, Johnson stresses the importance of realising that ‘research is not assessed in the REF by reference to the “prestige” of the journal it appears in or in the press it is published with’ (2). Johnson cautions against behaviours in universities that permit the hiring and promotion of

academics based on the publishing venues used for research – behaviours which ‘demonstrably distort the aim of the REF to recognise excellent research wherever it is found’ (2). Whether there is a possible link between these ‘proxy’ behaviours and a perceived ‘conservatism’ in research outputs, Johnson argues that it is time to move away from traditional forms of evaluating research based on ‘conservative inputs: prestige, history and inherited norms’ (2). ‘In many disciplines’, he says, ‘there is little room for experimentation during the early stages of one’s career’ (2). One way of framing this ‘experimentation’ would be in terms of topic and mode of communication, as above; but Johnson is careful to draw attention to the tendency among hiring staff in universities to privilege ‘traditional, print books, typically with a historically prestigious imprimatur’ (3). Part of the mission of *The Academic Book of the Future* is to explore the possibilities of digital technology and Open Access commitments. Johnson simply asks that we consider these avenues for ‘creatively expanding’ the English PhD once it is completed. For at the end of the day,

Experimentation should be at the heart of the research process, and experimentation in both the form and function of research outputs will become increasingly essential; not just in ensuring that research can grow to meet the changing demands of the 21st century, but also in taking advantage of the growing opportunities made available in the digital age. (3)

Ben Doyle concluded conversation about REF with an introduction to Palgrave’s current publishing platforms, paying particular attention to Pivot publications, which are medium-sized monographs or edited volumes of essays produced with a speed unmatched by competitors. Doyle’s major contribution, however, was to take us through the process of translating the PhD into an academic book: cut out the methodology, minimise the theory. Doyle is an expert at helping former PhD students turn their theses into books, but the prospect of doing this additional process can appear somewhat daunting. Having stated the facts, it was left to us as students to synthesise the perspectives offered throughout the day, and the challenge of turning the PhD into a book became one of the central topics of discussion, and, it would

seem, dissatisfaction. The healthy future of the English PhD, for this collection of students, is dependent on reconfiguring the relationship between the PhD and the book it is frequently expected to become afterwards.

Twelve Students Respond

In the spirit of mutual aid, the following twelve PhD students set aside the fact that ultimately they were all competing against each other, and convened in small groups to try and articulate problems and possible solutions to these problems: to envision a ‘what if?’ for the common good. Individual professional development was positioned therefore as conditional upon creating a shared educational infrastructure, sympathetic to such development and the kind of experimentation encouraged by the invited speakers. The participants were:

Hollie Johnson (University of Nottingham)

Jerome S. Wynter (University of Birmingham)

Becky Cullen (Nottingham Trent University)

Jo Dixon (Nottingham Trent University)

Lynda Clark (Nottingham Trent University)

Sean Donnelly (University of Birmingham)

Katie Hamilton (University of Nottingham)

Riczhard Vytniorgu (De Montfort University)

Emily Heathcote (University of Nottingham)

Richard Bromhall (Nottingham Trent University)

Hannah Murray (University of Nottingham)

Martin Kratz (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Six, inter-related questions were arranged in order of when they were introduced during the day.

The Question of Real-World Impact

The greatest challenge we had in reflecting on Maxwell's call to consider 'problems of living' was that this call (mistakenly) echoes so strongly the discourse of impact and engagement circulating HE at the moment. We had difficulty in moving beyond the language of 'engagement'. We still tended to frame research in English as something done privately in the university, according to its own aims and methods, and then rolled out to 'the public' in various recognisable forms: school talks, museum assistance, blog posts, policy engagement etc.

Moreover, while literary humanism has been firmly ousted from English studies in its older manifestations, we nevertheless found ourselves conceiving the 'value' of English in terms of articulating the central challenges and experiences of life for a given culture text(s) and reader(s) find themselves in. Of course, in her *Literature as Exploration* Rosenblatt honed in on the 'challenge of literature' as offering learners the opportunity to reflect on human relations and experiences in a way that would, in Maxwell's phrasing, make manifest some of the central aspects of living, in order to then reflect on the difference between literary worlds and the 'real world'. But Rosenblatt was able to frame the value of English studies in such a humanistic way because she began from the premise that literature, as it was studied and researched in the university, was fundamentally a mode of learning, of exploration, and hence, of personal development also. Rosenblatt's literary humanism stood the test of time because it was also pedagogical. The 2007 CEE 'Introduction to the Draft Report: The What, Why, and How of Teaching Literature', for example, explicitly recapitulates Rosenblatt's central ideas, in encouraging teachers to articulate the value of literary study in terms of what it can expose learners to in the way of what may be termed 'life studies'.

While we recognise that the English PhD is a step or two beyond the undergraduate degree programme, it nevertheless became obvious to us that the pedagogical foundations of the doctorate could be exploited in moving forward debates about the value of English studies

for life beyond the university, where addressing problems of living are as important as engaging with problems of knowledge. Of course, further work on distinguishing or negotiating between these two Maxwellian paradigms would help clarify the possibilities open to English PhD students.

Creative Approaches and REF

The prevalence of the ‘knowledge-inquiry’ paradigm for the English PhD was also apparent in discussions about creative experimentation in research and writing. There was a general assumption that creative experimentation would be (or has been, in some cases) deemed unscholarly by the institutional context in which the research is conducted. Supervisors tend to enforce a prescriptive model for treating the English PhD as an original contribution to knowledge. And while REF is not an immediately pressing issue for doctoral students, for creative writers it was a stumbling block altogether, given the current uncertainty regarding how creative writing is to be measured in future quality assurance initiatives.

If creative, experimental work in English (rather than Creative Writing) is (1) considered suspect by the professional gatekeepers (the supervisors), and (2) there is little incentive to engage in this kind of work for REF, then the motivation for pursuing modes of experimentation is perilously low. In spite of John Schad’s inspiring example, his admission that his creative-critical work is usually done after completion of the mandatory outputs for REF, belies the pressure to focus the attention on the tried and tested, which represents the highroad to securing a(n acceptable) ‘Reffable’ rating of 3 and above. The fact that there still seems to be no distinction between monograph and article in the REF is yet another cause for concern, holding the future of the academic book in the balance.

What seems to be the solution? Are English scholars with creative instincts and talents inevitably forced to wait until later in their career and once they have done the conventional

outputs before they experiment? In a 2013 interview about creative modes of writing, the scholar Jane Tompkins reflected:

I formed a writing group with two other people (professors, both women) who wanted to write for a wider audience. We'd all gotten to a point where we didn't have to please the older faculty any more because we were already full professors. We egged each other on. We encouraged each other to dig down and get personal, be honest and go for the jugular. It felt good.^{ix}

While Tompkins states that she waited until she was a full professor before she formally experimented with creative approaches to criticism, she also reveals that she found a way of integrating her work with creative nonfiction, which 'seems to be strong and getting stronger'. If creative criticism is couched as a relatively new genre, creative nonfiction is not, and there are numerous journals that specialise in publishing this genre of writing. For English PhD students, the answer to the dilemma of whether to experiment or toe the line seems to be solved by doing a mixture, and by engaging actively in forming networks and groups of sympathetic individuals who want to do the same thing. By becoming visible, continuing to try and experiment, and working within and trying to explore creatively the institutional blueprints for acceptable 'outputs' in the discipline, progress may be made.

PhD Training and the Academic Book of the Future

While research produced as part of the doctorate is often treated in a similar way to research produced by established academics, the PhD is nevertheless an educational qualification and those who pursue a PhD are still defined as learners in an institution ostensibly dedicated to teaching and learning as well as research. And yet the risks of treating the PhD as a stand-alone qualification with multiple career outcomes need to be considered carefully. With understandable hesitation due to an uncertain job market, universities tend to be increasingly mute on the English PhD as an entry into an academic career. And yet it is this silence that was targeted in *The Future of the English PhD* as widening the gulf between the PhD and the

academic book, making the ‘translation’ process more and more cumbersome for recently completed PhD students. If, as we suggest, universities pay more attention to the pedagogical nature of the PhD programme from a disciplinary-specific perspective, there is surely scope for re-defining assessment criteria for an acceptable English PhD: criteria that can be attuned to developments in academic book publishing.

If universities saw the English PhD as a site for creative experimentation according to thoughtfully articulated assessment criteria, negotiable between student and supervisory team (which the examiners would then honour as being institutionally sanctioned), then not only could students communicate what they have ‘learned’ by way of research in an organic way suitable to their particular project, but they could also embed into the assessment criteria expertise in crafting the academic book of the future. We recommend therefore that English departments seek to explore opportunities for organising writing workshops geared at greater consistency between the doctoral thesis and the range of possible publication avenues extant today. If at the beginning of the PhD journey, student and supervisory team met to discuss the relationship between what is to be ‘learned’ and how this will be communicated, then a tentative agreement could be drafted stating the way in which the ‘content’ will be conveyed in ‘form’. This might then be shelved as part of the institutional paperwork that accumulates over the course of a PhD for each student. As an exercise in democracy, a ‘learning agreement’ would be subject to revision as the research progressed.

These are ideas, and The Future of the English PhD is simply part of an increasingly visible attention swing in the U.K. to issues of learning in English studies at HE-level. With a possible Teaching Exercise Framework (TEF) on the horizon, however, it will become more and more crucial for academics (equipped with overdue incentives) to interrogate the entire English programme at university for quality of learning, according to established and recent research in this area. The English PhD needs to align much more successfully with academic

writing and publishing platforms beyond the PhD, and it can only do this if more fundamental questions concerning the value and role of English in HE are discussed, not only in writing, but in meetings and symposia where academics and management can talk and listen together with policymakers, about the most appropriate direction for the future of the English PhD. As students we surely do not have to be content with the status quo because it is the way things are always done. By working from our lived experiences of English education at this level, we can enter into dialogue with one another about a brighter future – entertaining the ‘what ifs’ at this stage, in preparation for holding the reins at a future one.

Notes

ⁱ See <http://academicbookfuture.org/acbookweek> (accessed January 28 2016).

ⁱⁱ This is explored at length in my PhD, provisionally entitled *In Quest of Wisdom: Louise Rosenblatt, H.D., and the Transactional Literary Experience*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Selected papers from this conference were developed and published in Niall Gildea et al. (eds), *English Studies: The State of the Discipline, Past, Present, and Future* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

^{iv} Of course, in saying this, I do not wish to diminish the work of University English or The English Association.

^v For more on Rosenblatt’s later activism, see Jeanne M. Connell, ‘Continue to Explore: *In Memory of Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2005)*’, *Education and Culture*, 21 (2005): 63-79.

^{vi} See <http://www.knowledgetowisdom.org/> (accessed January 29 2016).

^{vii} See John Schad and Jonathan Y. Bayot, *John Schad: In Conversation* (Manila: De La Salle, 2015) for a more comprehensive exploration into Schad’s professional development.

^{viii} I am grateful to Deborah Cartmell for stepping in at the last minute to cover the face-to-face discussion on REF, due to Ben Johnson’s last-minute absence.

^{ix} I am fully aware of the controversy Tompkins aroused in the early 1990s in *College English* and since then, through her position on theory (see Toril Moi’s *What is a Woman?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.). Nevertheless, her sensitivity toward institutional barriers to change and progress in English at HE are incisive.

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