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Teaching Chaucer

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Series Preface

One of many exciting achievements of the early years of the English Subject Centre was the agreement with Palgrave Macmillan to initiate the series “Teaching the New English.” The intention of the then Director, Professor Philip Martin, was to create a series of short and accessible books which would take widely-taught curriculum fields (or, as in the case of learning technologies, approaches to the whole curriculum) and articulate the connections between scholarly knowledge and the demands of teaching.

Since its inception, “English” has been committed to what we know by the portmanteau phrase “learning and teaching.” Yet, by and large, university teachers of English—in Britain at all events—find it hard to make their tacit pedagogic knowledge conscious, or to raise it to a level where it might be critiqued, shared, or developed. In the experience of the English Subject Centre, colleagues find it relatively easy to talk about curriculum and resources, but far harder to talk about the success or failure of seminars, how to vary forms of assessment, or to make imaginative use of Virtual Learning Environments. Too often this reticence means falling back on received assumptions about student learning, about teaching, or about forms of assessment. At the same time, colleagues are often suspicious of the insights and methods arising from generic educational research. The challenge for the English group of disciplines is therefore to articulate ways in which our own subject knowledge and ways of talking might themselves refresh debates about pedagogy. The implicit invitation of this series is to take fields of knowledge and survey them through a pedagogic lens. Research and scholarship, and teaching and learning are part of the same process, not two separate domains.

“Teachers,” people used to say, “are born not made.” There may, after all, be some tenuous truth in this: there may be generosities of spirit (or, alternatively, drives for didactic control) laid down in earliest childhood. But why should we assume that even “born” teachers (or novelists, or nurses, or veterinary surgeons) do not need to learn the skills of their trade? Amateurishness about teaching has far more to do with university claims to status, than with evidence about how people learn. There is a craft to shaping and promoting learning. This series of books
is dedicated to the development of the craft of teaching within English Studies.

Ben Knights

Teaching the New English Series Editor
Director, English Subject Centre
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The English Subject Centre

Founded in 2000, the English Subject Centre (which is based at Royal Holloway, University of London) is part of the subject network of the Higher Education Academy. Its purpose is to develop learning and teaching across the English disciplines in UK Higher Education. To this end it engages in research and publication (web and print), hosts events and conferences, sponsors projects, and engages in day-to-day dialogue with its subject communities.

http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk
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Gail Ashton
Louise Sylvester
March 2006
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Notes on the Contributors

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Introduction

Gail Ashton

Introduction

The New Chaucer Society's colloquium on teaching Chaucer that was inaugurated in Dublin in 1994 is now a regular event. The New York meeting in 2006 had a panel on pedagogical issues, organised by Larry Benson, and was open to teachers in schools and colleges as well as universities. The present volume of essays springs from a panel presentation and discussion on innovations in Chaucer teaching that Louise Sylvester and I organised for the New Chaucer Society in Glasgow in 2004. Implicit within its rationale was the question of how far pedagogical theories and practices have moved in the intervening years and it is here that I would like to begin.

In her introduction to the collection of papers that emerged from that 1994 meeting, Christine Rose identifies the state of Chaucer teaching in the 1990s. Her list of the concerns common to teachers of Chaucer include the following: the place of Chaucer in a shrinking course catalogue; the effects of historical and cultural difference; how to integrate theoretical scholarship into teaching; the need to respond to a restructuring of course provision according to the principles of cross-genre, cross-period and interdisciplinarity; and a diminishing, even resistant, literacy in Middle English and medieval contexts more generally (Rose 1996: 3). Then, as now, the near-impossibility of negotiating all of these issues in a single semester, or less, is the driving force of our teaching. I would certainly agree with Rose that, despite this, so many Chaucer teachers continue to devise stimulating courses for their students, often leading the way in an innovation partly borne of the necessity of responding to the dwindling take-up of medieval literature (Rose 1996: 3).
At first glance, it seems then that little has changed. There is, however, one crucial difference. In 1994, Rose speaks of the “teacher-scholars” and “master-teachers” who contributed to that forum (Rose 1996: 1). It is precisely this top-down, authoritative model of the teacher disseminating a body of knowledge (scholarship) that has shifted. This collection explores the notion of teacher as guide, facilitating a hands-on supported learning that takes place in dialogue with active learners. Some of our contributors directly confront this move (Ashton, Coote, Fitzgibbons). All engage it at some point to reflect on the sorts of activities we expect our students to do, the concomitant changes in styles of teaching and in the methods of assessment we construct.

Rose also comments on what she perceives as the happy marriage of academic research and investment in teaching and learning (Rose 1996: 2). One of the threads of my own discussion is the sense that Rose’s optimism was misplaced and that the alliance is far from unproblematic. That said, there are signs of a more positive commitment to the integration of these two crucial activities: external and in-house financial support for innovative projects, investigations and career development; the establishment of a national English Subject Centre, based at Royal Holloway, University of London, Centres of Excellence for teaching throughout the UK and of fully supported National Teaching Fellowships; the proliferation of pedagogical journals and the inclusion of such research in the Research Assessment Exercise 2008; and so on. In this more welcoming environment, perhaps what Rose hoped for over ten years ago might finally begin to come about.

Contexts

A glance at our list of contributors reveals the diversity of their backgrounds and interests. Our authors work in the UK in research-led redbrick universities and post-1992 institutions like the University of Central England, and in liberal arts colleges and large state universities in the US. Their essays mainly centre on undergraduate teaching (except Horobin and Knapp) and, save for the two in which the focus is on language, on teaching Chaucer to students of literature. Their work sets up cross-currents and a cross-pollination of ideas to speak in dialogue to and amongst each other, hence the lack of a summarising introduction; we would rather readers dip in and read across articles as well as selecting those of personal interest.

Here, and in the classroom, probably the most crucial factor influencing what we teach, and how, is the context of our particular environments.
We all begin by taking into account class size; the logistics of timetabling; aims and outcomes; whether a course is optional, compulsory, introductory, survey, or specialised stand-alone; and its place in a wider programme provision. We can and do respond to these external impositions in a variety of flexible and interesting ways, but we can't begin to design our courses until we have accounted for their contexts. Of course, we all make value judgements and philosophical choices when we teach. My intention in reminding us of some of those approaches that are unique to teachers of Chaucer, is an attempt to make them available for scrutiny and to stimulate further debate about the ways in which we might continue to negotiate them.

To some extent, the main divide appears to be between those who privilege a theoretical and critical study of Chaucer and those “pure” historicists who explore his works as a medieval cultural phenomenon (see Knapp, Kruger, Tolhurst, this volume). Interestingly, none of the essays in our volume directly discusses the former. It is as though this approach has become the new orthodoxy in Chaucer Studies, an assumption that we would do well to scrutinise further. Equally, others deploy manuscript evidence or the study of language (Horobin and Knapp), a context more readily available than in the past, thanks to the Internet and a wealth of electronic resources and projects. Some approach Chaucer through performance (Fitzgibbons, Tolhurst) and collaborative learning-as-process (Ashton, Coote, Fitzgibbons, Horobin, Kruger, Tolhurst), with the aim of allowing students some responsibility for their own learning. Others structure and deliver learning through electronic mediums (Ashton, Coote, Semper) or else use a building block model of learning, guiding and supporting students through bite-sized research tasks (Horobin, Knapp, Kruger, Semper, Coote). Above all, many teachers mix these approaches and keep in play a tension between the alterity of Chaucer and his continuities with our own time that is not unique to Chaucer Studies.

It does, though, promise “an important site for its exploration” (Field 2005: 13), a challenge that we would do well to take further if we are to continue to influence students’ perceptions, provoke questions and side-step the demands of goal-oriented, passive learners. In the age of student-as-consumer, this is sometimes an unwelcome or uneasy negotiation. And so we need, once more, to think through and clarify our agendas. What do we teach: the Canterbury Tales or other texts, and which editions, printed or on-line? Theory or history or both? What sorts of questions do we want our students to engage and to ask of themselves? What are our hopes and visions? Are our conflicting