

# Reinvention Centre Academic Fellowship Interim Report

## 1. Project Title

New undergraduate module 'Interdisciplinary and Creative Collaboration: the Faust Project'

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See here for project website:

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/undergraduate/current/modules/fulllist/special/interdisciplinaryandcreativecollaboration>

## 2. Keywords

Interdisciplinarity; creativity and performance in teaching and learning;

## 3. Summary

The aim of this project is to design and pilot an innovative new undergraduate module. The module is distinctive for three main reasons: 1) it is open to all second-year students from across the University, regardless of degree course; 2) it is delivered by an 'ensemble' of teachers from a range of departments; 3) it attempts to take seriously the notion of interdisciplinary learning and seeks to establish how feasible – logistically and philosophically – such learning is at the University of Warwick, and, by extension, at similar institutions across the UK.

The central aims of the first year of the Reinvention Academic Fellowship were:

- to design the module and have it approved by the English department and the Faculty of Arts; to have the proposal received and informally approved by all University faculty committees
- to recruit colleagues from across the University to teach on the module in 2009-10
- to recruit students for the pilot year
- to identify and begin to assemble teaching materials and resources

## 4. Activities

*Who?*

Staff. This first year has involved wide-ranging consultation between the module leader and a range of colleagues across the University. Initially, Julian Moss (Senior Assistant Registrar, Teaching Quality) was consulted; this established that there was no apparent precedent for a university-wide module, and therefore no obvious procedural routes either for consultation or for staff-recruitment. What followed, then, was an inevitably improvised and ad hoc process consisting of a campaign of

speculative emails, and a sequence of chance encounters and face-to-face meetings. At various teaching and learning events across campus I was given the opportunity to describe the project to potentially like-minded colleagues. These occasions proved invaluable. By March 2009, the spine of the teaching ensemble was in place, consisting of colleagues drawn from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds (including Business, Sociology, German, Medicine, Law); each of the colleagues combined an interest in the various disciplinary applications of the Faust legend with an appetite for teaching innovation. Although reactions to the idea of the module were always positive, anyone wishing to try this at home (as it were) should be advised that it requires persistence to convert this initial enthusiasm into a firm commitment to participate in the module. This is unsurprising: in offering to take on one or two sessions on the module, colleagues are, in essence, making more work for themselves in an already crowded timetable. This kind of generosity needs to be carefully nurtured. Flexibility, for example, is key: a module leader will quickly learn to shuffle and reshuffle the syllabus to accommodate changes in availability. We'll see next year how exactly this ensemble teaching works in practice. For the interim, I can report that the process of recruiting teachers has been time-consuming but ultimately inspiring; it is hugely encouraging that so many colleagues are willing to gift their time and expertise to this kind of project. There are, of course, issues of sustainability here, but for next year at least, a team is in place. (See website for syllabus and teachers.)

Students. The module has recruited the maximum 16 students for its pilot year. The aim was that these students should be drawn from across the University. In practice, this is not the case; all but one is from the Faculty of Arts. What prevented wider recruitment in the pilot year? 1) As the process of having the module approved took longer than expected, very little time was left to advertise the module across the University. Logistically, it is difficult to know when different departments set their options deadlines. Although the proposal was sent to all Faculty committees, this information clearly failed to trickle down in good time before students chose their options for the following year. Conclusion: a convenor of a module of this type needs to run a targeted advertising campaign towards the end of Spring term, knowing both the timing of options markets and how best to make the module attractive to students from different disciplines; 2) Perhaps most crucially, the fact that the Faust Project is a 30-CAT module made it unfeasible for many students. I was contacted by students from e.g. Physics who were itching to do a module of this kind, but were simply not allowed to devote this much of their degree to an external option. Important conclusion: if the module is to recruit as widely as possible, in future years it needs to be scaled down to a 12/15-CAT option. Not only will this make it technically viable for most students, it will also reduce the perceived risk of opting for something so exotic.

Local Schools. One of the benefits of having a year in which to plan and consult is that there is space for serendipity. As Schools Liaison officer, I'm regularly contacted by local schools seeking visiting lectures, campus visits etc. It became clear that at least one of these schools would be studying Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* at A-level next year. Kathryn Parsons (Head of English at Kenilworth School) and I decided that her

students would 'adopt' the Faust Project for themselves, not only keeping an eye on the progress of the module as it unfolds on the website, but also having the opportunity to contribute material relating to their experience of *Faustus*. This is an unexpected and potentially very rich area for collaboration. It is part of the module assessment criteria that the students should be able in some way to perform and make public their research. The connection with the students at Kenilworth School might inspire some creative coursework (e.g. write a 45-minute version of *Dr Faustus* for performance in sixth-forms; design a 90-minute workshop / teaching plan for A-level students, etc). For the students at Kenilworth, the collaboration promises to afford a real sample of life and work at their local university; at best, it might inspire some to continue their study at degree level.

### *Where?*

In its planning year, this project has been based in a virtual space somewhere between the English dept and the University's two CETLs. Next year, classes and workshops will take place in the CAPITAL and Reinvention Centres. These are malleable spaces – one a black box studio, the other a spacious white rectangular room – designed to house open-space learning; they are also equipped with good AV facilities. These types of space are crucial to the project; experience has shown that they promote a pedagogy conducive to non-traditional, collaborative, and exploratory learning and research.

### *Why?*

#### CONTEXT:

In the UK education system, the imperative to specialize at A-Level has traditionally had the effect of creating a segregation of intellects at a relatively early age, most obviously by dividing students between the Arts and the Sciences. Most students are obliged to choose a more or less coherent set of A-Level subjects; this coherence will in turn enhance their chance of progressing to an even more specialized subject at university. Once at university, the student finds that this segregation between disciplines is, on the whole, further entrenched – socially, architecturally, and intellectually. For the vast majority of students (and probably for many staff), knowledge of what happens in their university is restricted to at best two or three departments within their own faculty. Students are rarely encouraged to venture into other faculties, and few formal curricular opportunities exist for inter-faculty teaching and collaboration. A range of developments – both global and local – invites us to re-examine the organization of knowledge and space in the twenty-first-century university. The introduction of broad, interdisciplinary degree programmes at the University of Melbourne (the 'Melbourne model') has sparked interest internationally with many institutions likely to follow suit. Much closer to home, the recent creation on the Warwick campus of non-discipline-specific spaces (such as the Teaching Grid, the Reinvention Centre and the CAPITAL Centre) should also inform and inspire our teaching practices. These spaces – no less than examples of curricula reform elsewhere – require us to rethink not only how we teach, but what we teach and to whom.

#### AIM:

The broad educational purpose of this module is, therefore, to provide students and staff with the opportunity to work on a genuinely interdisciplinary project. The premise is simple: Each academic year an ensemble of students and teachers, with a variety of expertise and subject backgrounds, will come together to explore, research and present a public response to a major theme, idea, text or object. Over the course of the module, students will be taught on a weekly basis by colleagues from across the University; each session will not only cast new light on the object of study, but will also offer an introductory insight into the practices and concerns of a different discipline. The governing theme will change from year to year and will be determined by staff availability and through student consultation. The range of potential projects that would benefit from this type of interdisciplinary analysis is vast. Once the structure and philosophy of the module have been established within the University, future syllabi might focus on topics as diverse as Democracy, Skin, Coventry, the Renaissance, the Atom, and so on. In the first two years of the module, I have chosen the Faust myth as the governing theme. The group will study the myth both as the source of a wide range of appropriations and interpretations (in literature, drama, music, art, and film) but will also make more lateral connections between the parable and economics, ecology, neuroscience, theology and law. Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* begins with the protagonist questioning the uses and limitations of a university education: by choosing this myth as our object of study, it is hoped that the module will create a space in which students can reflect on the purpose of their time at university, and interrogate the status of academic knowledge and its relationship to the lives they will go on to lead beyond the academy.

Whilst putting into dialogue and synthesizing these different types of knowledge, students will also be required to devise ways of transferring their findings into the public sphere. In the Summer Term, the ensemble is required to 'stage' a public event. This might take the form of an original adaptation (stage, film, radio), an installation (or some other form of interactive experience), an exhibition, or public reading. For a weekend, a space on campus – e.g. the Mead Gallery, the SU, the Arts Centre foyer – might be transformed. Recently cultivated links with the Belgrade Theatre (Coventry) make it possible that the group project could also be transferred to a highly visible off-campus venue.

The group receives one collective mark for this collaborative effort. Some weeks later, each student submits a portfolio containing a logbook, details of their individual contribution to the group project, and a reflective essay critiquing the public project and reflecting on the module as a social and pedagogic experience.

#### PEDAGOGIC PRACTICE:

The module aims to marry some of the core principles of the University's two Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). In line with the remit of the CAPITAL Centre, the module will further the exploration of the potential overlaps between the process of theatrical rehearsal and creative pedagogy in higher education. It will, wherever possible, be delivered through active, practice-based workshops and seminars in open and flexible spaces (such as those provided by both

CETLs). It will follow CAPITAL's guiding pedagogic paradigm in which discovery through creative appropriation and teamwork replaces the more traditional model of a one-directional flow of information from teacher to student. Equally, the project aims to respond to some of the key objectives of the Reinvention Centre. It attempts to construct a microcosmic example of 'an inclusive academic community where learners, teachers and researchers are all seen as scholars in the common pursuit of knowledge' ('Reinvention Centre Two-Year Evaluation' p.5) and in doing so to promote enquiry-based, creative and open-ended collaboration between students and a range of staff and external experts.

On a recent posting on Warwick's Teaching Quality website, Michael Whitby set out a number of issues for discussion, first among which was the challenge of: 'Embedding creativity and innovation in the curriculum – securing engagement of individual academics and departments to overcome static or stagnant content or methods'. Other issues for discussion included: 'Recognition for team-working, especially in Arts and Social Studies'; 'Flexibility within curricula'; and 'Development of research-rich learning environment in all departments and at all levels, from first-year undergraduates through to PGRs' ('Distinctiveness at Warwick':[http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/quality/categories/enhancement\\_funding/distinctiveness/issues](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/quality/categories/enhancement_funding/distinctiveness/issues)). The undergraduate module in Interdisciplinary and Creative Collaboration seeks to engage with all of these issues and will, it is hoped, make a substantial contribution to this wider discussion

#### UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH WITHIN THE CURRICULUM:

The project's combination of texts, contexts and interdisciplinary approaches is designed to produce distinctive and original undergraduate research. This research will be made public through a variety of media – live performance, a 'living archive' webpage, and through the publication of criticism or creative writing in undergraduate forums including the *Reinvention* journal. The length of the course gives students the experience of devising and executing a long-term creative research project; the degree of flexibility within the structure also encourages students as individuals and in groups to formulate and pursue their own research agenda.

#### GRADUATE SKILLS:

The module aims to prepare students for the wide range of post-university working environments that require advanced interpersonal skills, collaborative aptitude, and the ability to think laterally and creatively. It recognises that 'graduateness' depends not only on specialist disciplinary knowledge, but also on the ability to apply generic and transferable skills in a post-disciplinary context. Research suggests that a number of essential skills (problem-solving, spoken communication, creativity, leadership) required by a majority of graduate jobs are not always sufficiently developed by the undergraduate curriculum (see Elias and Purcell, 'Higher education, skills and employment: careers and jobs in the graduate labour market' (<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/research/completed/7yrs2/rp3.pdf>).

At roughly the point at which this module was being approved, Warwick embarked on a major collaborative enterprise with King's College, London. One of the key objectives of the 'Graduate Pledge' is to 'Guarantee that each student will be enabled to develop their capabilities by experiencing a research-led learning environment, further enhanced by:

- interdisciplinary study
- a globally-oriented curriculum
- community engagement, internationally as well as in the UK
- an environment that stimulates academic literacy'

## **5. Outcomes / Implications / Resources / References**

To follow in final report (May 2010).

## **6. Contact details**

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