

Peter Hinds – TQEF, RiT project

‘Online Student Engagements with Research Archives’

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This project was run with the participation of stage one English and Creative Writing students and also with taught MA student. The first-year students (a cohort of around 115) undertook individual searches for primary texts in the seventeenth century using the online database EEBO (Early English Books Online), in line with specific instructions and within set parameters relevant and appropriate to their level, and then were asked to reflect critically upon and evaluate their findings. This exercise was supported by SharePoint and took place entirely online, student comments (750 words) being posted in the form of a Blog. The taught MA students undertook a form of problem-based learning, editing a poem collaboratively (in groups of around three), again entirely online in the form of a Wiki. They again consult EEBO for this exercise and thus utilise and search amongst one of the primary research databases for English.

In both exercises, students are introduced to the digitised images of seventeenth-century books, unmediated by editorial introductions, annotations and textual modernisations (but steered by instructions): this prompts them to consider and reflect upon the business of editing and the work done to prepare texts for modern readers. One aspect of the research informing this is the history of the book and the history of reading, growing research areas which explore the material artefacts of books (the historically specific nature of book design, production, distribution and reception), and the differences in reading practices in different cultures. Taking students to these primary resources should enrich their learning experience and help them appreciate more fully the kinds of texts they are reading and how they might have originally been interpreted.

Thus far the exercise for stage one students is tailored to a specific module (which considers seventeenth-century literature), but it could easily be adapted and extended to other parts of the English and Creative Writing curriculum with the use of other electronic research resources/databases at subsequent stages. The student response to this exercise was positive and would support such an aspiration. Likewise the MA-level exercise was successful, with students benefiting from an introduction to the EEBO resource (for their future research use) and also from the knowledge gained in relation to history of the book and the history of reading in the seventeenth century. Both exercises will, with refinements, be carried out again.

Dissemination of the experience of running the project and of the findings (in relation to both the undergraduate and postgraduate exercises) has been both informal amongst colleagues (both inside and outside of the English and Creative Writing subject group), but also more formal. In the latter respect, for instance, the project

was presented at a Sharepoint Showcase event at the University of Plymouth (11 June 2008).

Project cost

The budget for the project was spent on the subscription to the databases on which the exercises were based.