

Working in postwar Britain

An undergraduate module developed for the Centre for
Careers Management Skills (CCMS), University of Reading by
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Introduction

In 2010 the Centre for Career Management Skills (a HEFCE funded CETL) invited applications for funds to develop a proposed module outline that would illustrate how 'career studies' might be embedded in an academic discipline. As a result of this competitive call funds were awarded to Dr. William May to develop Working in Postwar Britain.



Working in Postwar Britain forms a suite of career studies module descriptions published by CCMS. Readers who want to see other embedded and trans-disciplinary models will be interested in New Directions in Career Studies: English and Media Degrees and Designing a Generic Career Studies Module: a Practical Example.

The career studies approach advocates treating the concept of 'career' as the object of academic enquiry (McCash, 2008[1]). This enquiry can be explored through a trans-disciplinary module or embedded within a subject. In the case of the latter, career studies offers the potential of viewing career through the lens of the 'host' discipline.

Working in Postwar Britain offers a richly realised picture of career studies as an integral part of an English degree. It provides a very specific illustration of how the concepts and content of English can be used to explore career, and enable students to reflect on the interconnections between study, self and society.

As such it shows how career studies can be situated in a specific context (Horn, 2009[2]) and how the pedagogy of career learning can draw from discipline traditions as well as those from employability and PDP (Stanbury, 2010[3]).

'Un-built designs' have been very influential in the history of Architecture. CCMS is firmly convinced of their value as a means of envisioning new possibilities for career learning as well. For this reason we are delighted to make available Working in Postwar Britain.

Dave Stanbury,

University Teaching Fellow, June, 2011.

¹ McCash, P (2008), Career Studies Handbook, Higher Education Academy, York.

² Horn, J. (2009) *Values at work, Manchester: Higher Education Careers Service Unit.*

³ Stanbury, D. (2010) 'The kindness of strangers: how careers educators and the wider academic community can help each other', Vol 52, Issue No 2, 2010 Edition, Journal of Education and Training pp 100-116.

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Module proposal:

Working in Postwar Britain



From Tertius Lydgate in *Middlemarch* (1874) to the careerist clerics of Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857), the British realist novel has often centred on the professional struggles of its protagonists. Yet the postwar period, with its expansion of secondary education, speaks with particular urgency to current trends in and attitudes to employment.

In 1957, Michael Young coined the term 'meritocracy' (Young, 1957), an increasingly charged term which still shapes attitudes towards career progression and promotion today. John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958) tracked the disparities between the private and public sector in the US, an often antagonistic issue which has re-ignited in Britain since the recession. Drawing on sociological studies of the period, this unit asks students to read postwar fiction through the lens of employment practice, career stratification, and social change. Focusing on totemic examples of careers in the tertiary section (Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*, 1954), the manufacturing industry (Muriel Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, 1960), and manual labour (Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*, 1958), it will ask challenge students to consider reflexively:

How political and social changes impact upon employment.

How hierarchies and company structures are established, enforced, or challenged.

How our career expectations might be shaped by social expectation as well as personal ambitions.

How terms such as 'meritocracy', 'living wage', 'white-collar' and 'aspiration' are used in postwar fiction, and how our attitude to those terms is shaped by cultural context.

This detailed critical engagement follows calls for a nuanced approach to Career Studies (Kneale 2007), while emphasising the positive benefits of career development learning (Watts 2006). By focusing on cultural constructions of career paths it invokes the social approach of Goffman (1968); it also draws on the language-centred approach to career development learning outlined by (Gowler and Legge 2009).

Assessment and course delivery empowers students in the career development process. The first strand centres on primary reading of the texts alongside cultural studies of the period, resulting in weekly class debates and structural reflection on the issues raised. The second strand asks students to focus on one text in relation to contemporary academic literature on career development, and to present a short talk at a local sixth-form college under the title: '*Read Your Way Into Employment*'. This is the summative assessment for this section of the module, accompanied by a reflective portfolio on their talk.

This proposed course would run as part of the existing undergraduate module at Southampton *Writing and Culture in Postwar Britain*, and make up 50% of its 20 CATS points.



Will May,
Author

ENGL2056 Writing and Culture in Postwar Britain

20 CATS points at Level 2

Delivery: 8 x weekly seminars (2hr), 8 x lecture sessions (1 hr), 2 x sessions in local sixth-forms (2 hr), 1 tutor consultation

Module: 200 hours (160 hours of private study; 40 hours of contact time)

Week One

A formal education

Essential reading:

Richard Hoggart *The Uses of Literacy* (1957)

[Read chapters 1, 2, 9, 10 and 11]

Michael Young *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958)

[Read Introduction to the Transaction edition and chapters 3,5, and 7]

Suggested further reading:

Lynne Segal, 'Look back in Anger: Men in the Fifties', *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London: Virago, 1990)

Raymond Williams, 'The uses of literacy: working class culture', *Universities and Left Review*, Summer 1957, Vol. 1, No. 2

Week Two

A formal education II

Essential reading:

B.S. Johnson *Albert Angelo* (1964)

B.S. Johnson, *Introduction to Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs* (London: Hutchinson, 1973)

Suggested further reading:

Raymond Williams, 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel', *The Long Revolution* (London: Hogarth, 1961), pp. 274-289

Week Three

Page and stage I

Essential reading:

Philip Larkin *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964)

The Mersey Sound Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten (1967)

Suggested secondary reading:

Blake Morrison *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Randall Stevenson *The Last of England?* *Oxford English Literary History Vol. 12* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. chp. 5 & 6

Peter Whitehead *Peter Whitehead and the Sixties*

Week Four

Page and stage II

Essential reading:

John Osborne *Look Back in Anger* (1956)

Suggested secondary reading:

Stephen Lacey *British Realist Theatre: the New Wave in its Context, 1958-68* (London: Routledge, 2005)

Don Rebellato *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London: Routledge, 1999)

Week Five

Page and stage III

Essential reading:

Joe Orton *Loot* (1966)

Suggested secondary reading:

Anthony Aldgate, *Censorship and the Permissive Society: British Theatre and Cinema (1955-1965)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

Alan Sinfield ed. *Society and Literature, 1945-70* (London: Methuen, 1983), esp. articles by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield

Week Six

Working in Postwar Britain I

Essential reading:

Kingsley Amis *Lucky Jim* (1954)

Suggested further reading:

Angela Hague, 'Picaresque Structure and the Angry Young Novel', *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1986), pp. 209-220

Dominic Head *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), ch. 2

First assessment due in at the end of week six

Week Seven

Working in Postwar Britain II**Essential reading:**

Muriel Spark *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960)

Muriel Spark, 'The Desegregation of Art', 33-37 in *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* ed. Joseph Hynes (Oxford: G.K. Hall, 1992)

Suggested secondary reading:

William H. Whyte *The Organization Man* (1960)

Week Eight

Working in Postwar Britain III**Essential reading:**

Alan Sillitoe *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (1958)

Peter Willmott and Michael Young, *Family and Kinship in East London* (1969)

Week 9

Tutorial feed-back on essays and talk-planning; initial informal visit to local sixth form for discussion of careers

Week 10

Working in Postwar Britain IV

Ten-minute talks to local sixth-form under the title 'Read Your Way Into Employment'

Week 11

Working in Postwar Britain**Essential reading :**

J.K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (1958)

Second assessment due at end of week twelve

Learning Outcomes:

To consider reflexively notions of 'career', 'work' and 'employment' in relation to fictional and real-world examples

A critical understanding of literary culture in postwar Britain.

The development of skills in communication and critical expression

An understanding of how educational and social backgrounds shape expectations and understandings of a career

Assessment:

Essay of c. 2000 words from a choice of 5 questions

Talk with local sixth-form, and reflective written account of experience (50%; assessing Learning Outcomes 1, 2, 3, and 4).

Assessment questions

First assessment (on 'A Formal Education' and 'Page and Stage' units)

- 1 'The school system in Britain remains the most divisive, unjust, and wasteful of all the aspects of social inequality' (C.A.R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism*). In what ways do any of the texts you have studied so far concern themselves with issues of education and/or equality?
- 2 'Words, it seems, can no longer be used simply and naturally. All the great words like love, hate; life, death; loyalty, treachery; contain their opposite meanings and half a dozen shades of dubious implication' (Doris Lessing, 'A Small Personal Voice'). How important is language and/or form in any of the novels you have studied so far?
- 3 'I hate all this pharisaical twittering about the 'state of our civilisation', and I suspect anyone who wants to buttonhole me about my 'role in society'.' (Kingsley Amis to Tom Maschler). How useful are any of these novels as social commentaries?

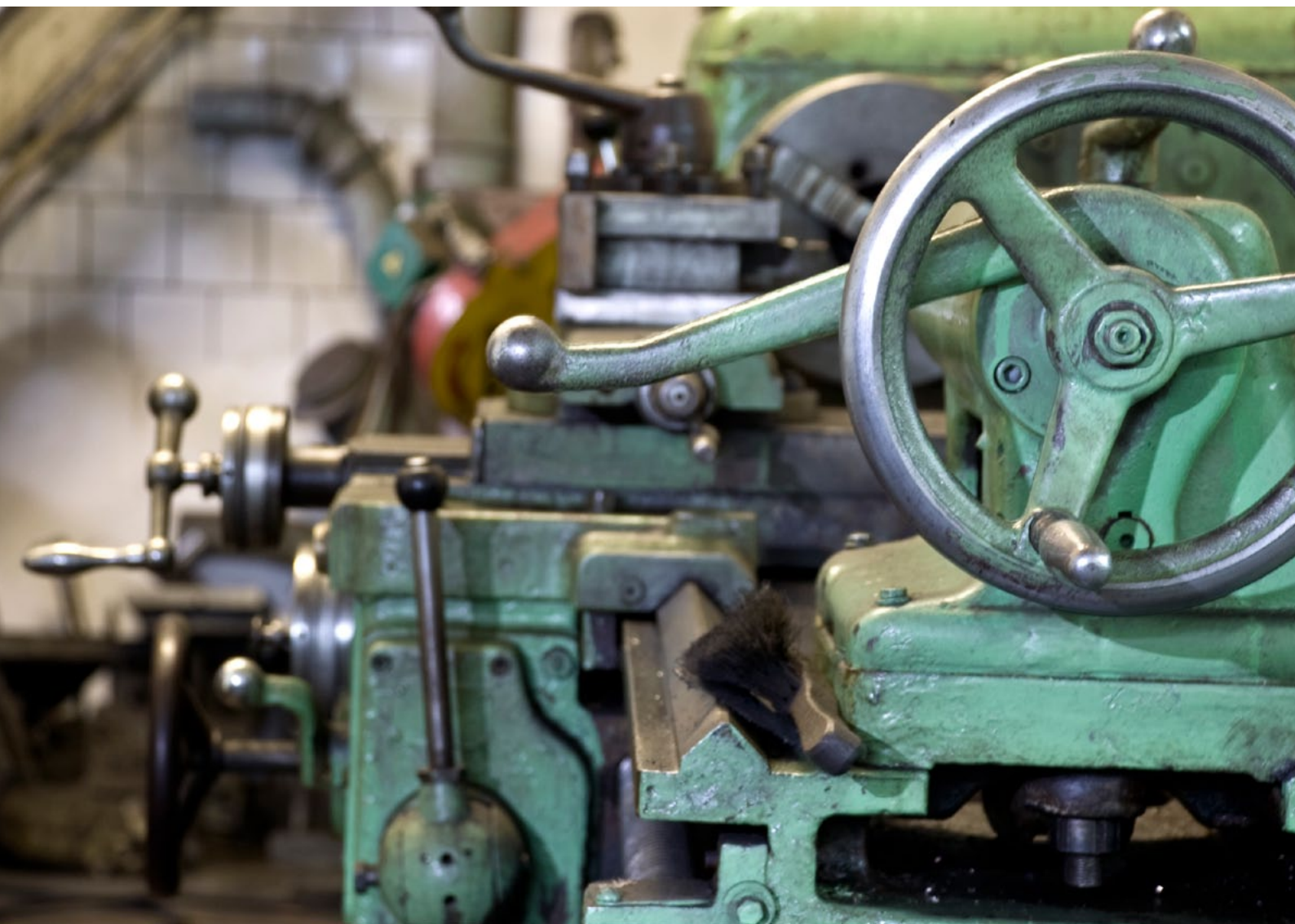
- 4 'It is as obvious as it is strenuously denied that in this century English poetry went off on a loop-line that took it away from the general reader' (Philip Larkin, introduction to John Betjeman's *Collected Poems*). 'I never deliberately set out to shock, but when people don't walk out of my plays I think there is something wrong' (John Osborne). Discuss the idea of audience in the work of either TWO poets or TWO playwrights.
- 5 Discuss the representation of the urban or the provincial in any of the novels you have studied so far.

Second assessment (on 'Working in Postwar Britain' - these titles are indicative; students will title and design their own reflective accounts in consultation with the module tutor)

The jobbing teacher: winning minds and making do in B.S Johnson's *Albert Angelo*.

Poverty of expectation: violence and vigilance in Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*.

Gainful employment: salaries, postwar fiction, and what makes us happy.



Examples of learning activities

a) What are the social responsibilities of a workplace?

(a learning activity using Muriel Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*)

Consider Mr. Druce's proud social vision for his company:

'Meadows Meade are building up a sound reputation with regard to their worker-staff. We have a training scheme, a recreation scheme, and a bonus scheme. We haven't yet got a pension scheme, or a marriage scheme, or a burial scheme, but these will come. Comparatively speaking, we are a small concern, I admit, but we are expanding.'

Muriel Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (London: Penguin, 1999), p.17

Now read this critical extract from an essay on Spark's use of caricature in her work:

'Her satire is based on the premise that the human activities which she depicts are not what ultimately matters. Her comedy reveals the triviality of what is perceived by her characters as important... [she] holds her own characters at a disdainful arm's length... the merely human and worldly is inevitably flat and two-dimensional because the richest and most complex truths lie elsewhere.'

Ian Gregson, 'Muriel Spark's Caricatural Effects', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2005), p.4.

How far do you agree with Gregson's comment on the 'triviality' of life in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. Is the world of work meaningless? You might want to think about:

- The evasive language of business and 'productivity' used by Mr. Druce
- The social structure created by the firm – is it a community or a hierarchy?
- Characters' responses to the workplace and their interior lives; is there space for a private self in a workplace that has its own burial scheme?

b) Is meritocracy the best model for a profession?

Re-read Michael Young's dystopian vision of a meritocratic society in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1957), and consider how the word he coined is now used in contemporary politics and journalism (find five examples).

Think of two professions which rely on graduate entry or advancement on meritocratic principles. Do either of these professions suffer from the contradictions Young outlines? Can you think of any jobs which eschew meritocratic principles?

c) What role does education play in preparing you for work, or shaping your career expectations?

(a learning activity using Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*)

'I am told today rather more than 60 per cent of the men who go to the universities go on a Government grant. This is a new class that has entered upon the scene. It is the white-collar proletariat. Mr. Kingsley Amis is so talented, his observation is so keen, that you cannot fail to be convinced that the young men he so brilliantly describes truly represent the class with which his novel is concerned. They do not go to the university to acquire culture, but to get a job, and when they have got one, scamp it. They have no manners, and are woefully unable to deal with any social predicament.'

W. Somerset Maugham, Review of Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*, 'Books of the Year', Sunday Times, 2 Dec 1955

What anxieties about education and career expectations can we find in *Lucky Jim* and its critical reception? List all the characters in the novel by profession, and consider what status is conferred on them by their job and educational background.

d) What demands does an organization make of an individual? (end-of-course activity)

Read the following definition of an 'organization man' by William H. Whyte. '{The organization men] are not the workers, nor are they the white-collar people in the usual, clerk sense of the word. These people only work for the Organization. The ones I am talking about belong to it as well. They are the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life, and it is they who are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions'.

William H. Whyte *The Organization Man* (London: Penguin, 1960), p.3

Which characters in the novels you have studied does this definition encompass? How do the characters that resist this term do so effectively?

Follow-up question: How do the novelists themselves resist the formal or 'institutional' expectations of the realist novel? Is there a link between the conformist characters they describe and their own response to literary tradition?



Reflective account of designing the module

Academics and the graduate career

Many academics in the humanities have continued to be sceptical about 'employability', or demands from their institution to make their modules more 'career friendly' (Atwood 2010). While this scepticism is by no means limited to English, one of the first disciplines to embrace Marxism might have good reason to be critical of government policy. Colleagues' reservations about instrumentalism can be well-founded; perhaps a more salient criticism is that the top-down demands of producing 'employable' graduates will dilute the academic content of undergraduate courses.

Given this suspicion, perhaps the most fitting place to begin an investigation into the English discipline and career development is with English academics themselves. Do they view their university careers as vocations, or as an expedient means to do the intellectual work they feel is their vocation. Are they teachers bound by university edict to research? Do they feel loyal to their university, to their discipline, or do they see both as constructs which manage and contain their own individual projects? I began exploring some of these questions in my own department by asking colleagues which book made them decide to become academics. Although I explained their answers would be used in a careers project, I was careful not to specify the kind of book I wanted them to tell me about. Some of their comments gave fuel to the often-held assumption that academics have chosen to work in universities precisely because they see themselves outside of a career or a professional job (Horn 2009), and were surprised I would consult them on the topic:

I hardly think my experiences are relevant to any study of employability. Except, of course, as a Dire Warning.

I'm curious as to what this says about employability?

However, these kind of responses were the exception. The majority of responses suggested a deep commitment to their profession, and a clear sense of 'initiation' through a particular text, as in the medieval Professor who recalled an inscription in a childhood book that had opened his eyes to the social gift of translation. What also became clear was a sense that respondents felt they should give the name of a critical work or academic study, but wanted to give the name of a work of literature.

it may have been a passion for the Brontës, but you really mustn't tell that to anyone....

Yes, I hate to admit to this, but Lamb's 'Tales from Shakespeare'...

Does this tell us anything more than academics have professional anxieties refracted through literary taste? The distinction between a literary and critical text seems significant. The literary text is the object, providing the space for the academic to develop their critical skills; the critical work provides a model for their subsequent work. These answers might

give us pause to the response 'denied' by these literary professionals: what is it that has excited them about these books, and are we doing everything possible to ensure this excitement is passed on to students in our teaching? Might our methods sometimes serve to correct or temper the primary enthusiasms that motivated us to our career in the first place? In this sense, the process of designing this module provided several moments of reflection for myself and my colleagues.

Yet a lone response suggested a third way to map the relationship between a literary text and vocation, and was accompanied by yet further insistence on secrecy:

David Lodge, 'Nice Work' - read it when I was 14, wanted to be Robyn. Don't tell anyone.

David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1984), which retells Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* via a feminist academic, Robyn Penrose, becomes an exemplary model for the module outline detailed above. This text makes an academic career possible for a 14-year old girl not because it gives them something to write about, or shows them what a work of criticism might do, but because it depicts a female academic working in a contemporary university setting. This insistence on the realist here places particular formal restraints on the texts and periods of literature that might withstand this potentially representational response to career skills and English literature. Yet the lively response to a fictional world also shows the power of the realist novel to enact change. As such, it provides a starting point for thinking about the ways various students might be encouraged to approach a text, and for the module outlined here.

Careers and module-planning

Any undergraduate student who had a grounding in the realist novel will have come across profound interrogations of how we spend our time and what work makes us happy. *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* (2009) by Alain de Botton, which uses examples from literature and philosophy to illustrate its points, shows the success of this approach. Yet an undergraduate module should ask more of its students than looking to fiction for a series of test-cases. Re-designing an existing module was an opportunity to open students' eyes to the potential value of the books they were reading without excluding the critical skills expected from a level 2 course. Throughout the design and consultation process, care has been taken to avoid the knee-jerk evaluative response which might encourage students to look uncritically to the realist novel for 'real world' examples of work.

A version of the undergraduate module 'Writing and Culture in Postwar Britain' has been running for a number of years at the University of Southampton. In a sense, the texts on offer – which have included John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) – already provide a unique opportunity for students to reflect on the purpose of tertiary education, the links between career expectations and social backgrounds, and how the individual might be affected by the interventions of the state or social engineering. However, the learning context meant that few students were making these links explicitly for themselves. This was confirmed by a survey I carried out on 26 students taking the current module in 2010.

This was given to them eight weeks into the course. Even when prompted by a leading question, only half the students agreed that the idea of work, employment, or career was ‘quite important’ in the texts they had read so far (see Appendix). Over 75% of respondents said no novel they read had ever made them think about their career, or prompted them to consider what kind of work they enjoyed. Of the other 25%, most wanted to become writers, with the text in question providing the exemplary object of their chosen profession rather than an investigation of it. The students questioned also found little in common with the characters of the novels they had read on the course. While nearly all respondents agreed that the most important factors for determining your career path in the postwar period (based on fiction they had read) were your class or economic background, most respondents were sure that their own career would be determined by their personal qualities and their education. The emphasis on education also extended to careers advice: they expected to learn about the work they might enjoy from their academic success (2 responses), their university lectures (2 responses), or from seminars (3 responses).

These results might tell us a number of things. Firstly, their own expectation of where they might learn about careers is at odds with the prevailing staff assumption, who might expect it to be covered by family discussion, or a university careers service. Here, a better conversation between academics and career educators is necessary (Stanbury 2010). Secondly, their critical engagement with the literature on their course does not always extend to personal analogy: despite the fact that few of them had given serious thought to their careers after university, they trusted to a self-determinism people from fictions of ‘the past’ were not allowed. While the revised and extended version of the module does not necessarily ‘solve’ these institutional, educational, and pragmatic problems, it attempts to integrate them into the learning outcomes themselves.

Module rationale

1. Content and context.

Rather than offer itself as an explicitly careers-focused module, this revised course imbeds personal reflective thinking about employment into a wider intellectual debate about education, work, and social status. Secondary texts such as Galbrieth’s *The Affluent Society* and Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* are explored and contextualized as products of the postwar period, but also provide opportunities for wider debate. There are also module materials that expand beyond notions of career and employment (as in the unit on Page and Stage), attempting an integrationist module of career-development which does not ‘relegate’ it to a stand-alone module (Kneale 2007). The complex and often competing trends of the postwar period are not stifled in the interests of providing a ‘guide’ to the world of work.

2. Reflection and interaction.

Seminar plans and learning activities designed for this revised module put the emphasis on personal reflection. This lays the groundwork for the final self-directed project. Several of the course texts show teachers or figures of authority presenting ideas to schoolchildren or young learners with varying degrees of success (as in Kingsley Amis’ *Lucky Jim*, or the

bewildered part-time teacher Albert Angelo in B.S. Johnson's eponymous novel); while the unit 'Working in Postwar Britain' provides students with the source material for their sixth-form talk, the first unit 'A formal education' provides them with various models of engagement for it.

3. Instrumentalism and evaluation.

Post-Browne report, many commentators imagine or fear a 'perfect market' model of HE teaching, where exit-point employment figures are used to rank universities competing for student income (Collini 2010). As has been shown elsewhere, instrumentalist models of employability rarely benefit students, academics, or employers (Horn 2009). Besides the obvious transferable skills gained in presenting to a group of sixth-form students, this module does not offer work placements or pragmatic answers to graduate employment. However, in encouraging students to learn from (and teach) what they read, and to engage critically with political and economic models of employment, it provides a space within an academic university context where students might view their subject-specific skills and knowledge not just as transferable, but fundamental to the world of work outside.



Appendix: ENGL2056: Postwar survey

1 How important is the idea of work, employment or a career in most of the texts you have read in this course so far?

- Very important Quite important
 Not very important Not at all important

In which text is the idea of a career most important?

2 Thinking about the texts you have read so far, name the first two characters you can think of and their job titles:

1

2

3 Based on the texts you have read on this course, which factors most determine someone's career in the postwar period?

- Class / economic background Education
 Personal qualities Family / peer expectations

Other

4 Which of the above factors will most determine your choice of career?

- Class / economic background Education
 Personal qualities Family / peer expectations

Other

5 Has any novel you have ever read made you think about your career, or consider what kind of work you enjoy?

- Yes No

If yes, please give the name of the novel

How did it make you think, or rethink, your understanding of a career?

6 If you answered no to question 5, what prompts you to think about the kind of work you enjoy?

Thank you for filling in this survey.

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