Against Value in Arts and Humanities Education

Some reflections on teaching practice
Introduction

• Reflect on three or our teaching and learning projects I’ve worked on at Sheffield since 2010

• the benefits and challenges of reimagining the University (classroom, department, faculty)

—as a community whose joint members are staff and students.
Two key ideas in the background

• a) Against Value
  – *Against Value in the Arts and Humanities* proposes that it is often the staunchest defenders of art who do it the most harm, by suppressing or mollifying its dissenting voice, by neutralizing its painful truths, and by instrumentalizing its ambivalence. The result is that rather than expanding the autonomy of thought and feeling of the artist and the audience, art's defenders make art self-satisfied, or otherwise an echo-chamber for the limited and limiting self-description of people's lives lived in an "audit culture", a culture pervaded by the direct and indirect excrescence of practices of accountability.
  – Sam Ladkin, Emile Bojesen and Robert McKay, *Against Value in the Arts and Education* (Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming 2015)
Two key ideas in the background

• b) How to imagine a University which takes account of its students’ now central role (post 2012) in the patronage of its intellectual activity – without succumbing to the logic of consumerism: that students “should get what they pay for”.

• **Answer:** to re-think the core activity of the university – intellectual inquiry – as necessarily a collaborative and collegial activity in which students play a central role.
Teaching/Learning–Led Research

• Subject-specific or interdisciplinary research activity, performed by all members of the learning community, that is oriented around the classroom and student-learning.
  – Staff research happens in concert if not necessarily in harmony or in unison with student research (influencing and influenced by it).

• This need not lead to collaborative outputs or even be conceived of as being done ‘together’
  – Rather, ‘teaching’ is opens up the staff-researcher’s process of inquiry for the students
  – Students then conduct their own research along related but independent lines.
  – The staff researcher’s project continues and develops alongside this
Some examples

- IPO: 100/200/300 Interdisciplinary Research in Practice (up to 12 students)
  - Elective
  - Interdisciplinary A&H staff team and students from across the Faculty
  - Thematic focus on “Work” which students then explore

- LT261: Radical Theory (up to 30 students)
  - Elective
  - School of English staff and students
  - Project focus on ‘social crisis’ and utopian critique

- LIT303: Contemporary Literature (up to 200 students)
  - Compulsory for BA Literature
  - Literature staff and students
  - Thematic focus on six researcher-led topics which students then explore
Key points of co-incidence

• Learning begins with staff introducing their research in the manner of an ongoing/unfinished project
  — explaining the inspirations for the inquiry; their processes and research methods; and current problems with the research.
• Seminars are based around students initially exploring problems and challenges developed in staff-researchers projects
  — but these lead students towards their own independent process of inquiry
• Teaching develops as research support; assessment becomes a process much more similar to academic ‘peer review’.
• On the ‘staff-side’ the conventional circulation of research (the research seminar) is conceived to have this expanded audience and is open to students.
• The classroom becomes more like a coterie – where possible results are ‘shared’ via symposium rather than presented in a private exchange between student and teacher.
Challenges

• Difficulty of genuine collaboration/partnership (in IrIP and Contemp Lit the scope of the research is determined in advance by staff).

• Challenges of multiple audiences – difficult both to produce cutting edge research and think of it in terms suitable for novice-researchers

• Scale: two small modules these are hugely resource-intensive and are reliant on staff goodwill where collaboration/multiplicity of voices itself resists the top-down logic of ‘research-led teaching’. But LIT303 is possible model here.

• Institutional pressures: module choice; disciplinarisation; territory disputes given the student-as-unit-of-resource-model; massification of ideals.

• Student fear of openness necessary for genuine inquiry in a culture of educational consumption and employability by degree grade.