

Teaching Projects in English Studies

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This contribution propagates a project approach to English Studies. It emphasises that project thinking has more advantages than disadvantages and tries to illustrate this by current examples from journalistic writing to translation, from media to computing projects. These examples prove that projects are not a supplementary element in English studies, but an integral part and that they are neither pure fun nor surplus work, but simply a good opportunity to bring modern life and job requirements into the traditional curriculum of English Departments in Germany and the Czech Republic.

INTRODUCTION

Although thinking in terms of projects is well-known in research perspectives and in English language teaching at schools, it seems surprisingly neglected in teaching perspectives. Certainly, university teachers would often emphasise their attempts to integrate modern research projects as much as possible into their teaching, but the concept of project work does not figure prominently in the English curriculum except where external funding is involved. Admittedly, project thinking may have disadvantages. Occasionally, only short-term aims are envisaged, and when they are achieved, a new project has to be started; this does not support long-term planning and sustainability. However, project thinking also has its advantages, which I would like to illustrate in this contribution.

Defining criteria

Although projects in the widest sense can be defined in many ways, I see two central defining criteria of project work and some others:

1) limited duration

Time constraints are always a challenge for the project manager (usually the teacher), who has to keep a tight control of project activities, participant contributions and collaboration in general, but it has the obvious advantage that all participants can clearly see what they have achieved at the end of the project.

2) a final product

The end of the project is usually defined by a clear result, usually a finished product that is (hopefully) presentable to the general public.

However, there are more features that contribute to the special value of

project work. A special opportunity and a challenge at the same time is that projects are

3) a collaborative effort

A product completed by several students can be bigger and "more presentable" than an individual student project such as a presentation or a term paper. But this "collaborative creativity" requires more conscious planning than usual over a longer time period. In scientific research projects, specific charts, so-called Gantt charts, are used to illustrate the breakdown of work activities over time. For students not familiar with the concept, Wikipedia is a starting point, the value of its information must, of course, be verified by comparing it with other sources. In this case, Wikipedia offers a satisfactory explanation (Text 1) and some interesting additional information (incl. the fact that Gantt charts are named after an American, who popularised them in the West, but invented by a Russian over a hundred years ago) and even a few illustrative examples without copy-right restrictions (Fig. 2):

A **Gantt chart** is a popular type of [bar chart](#) that illustrates a [project schedule](#). Gantt charts illustrate the start and finish dates of the [terminal elements](#) and summary elements of a [project](#). Terminal elements and summary elements comprise the [work breakdown structure](#) of the project. Some Gantt charts also show the [dependency](#) (i.e., precedence network) relationships between activities. Gantt charts can be used to show current schedule status using percent-complete shadings and a vertical "TODAY" line as shown here.

Text 1: Wikipedia entry s.v. Gantt chart (last accessed 20/06/08)

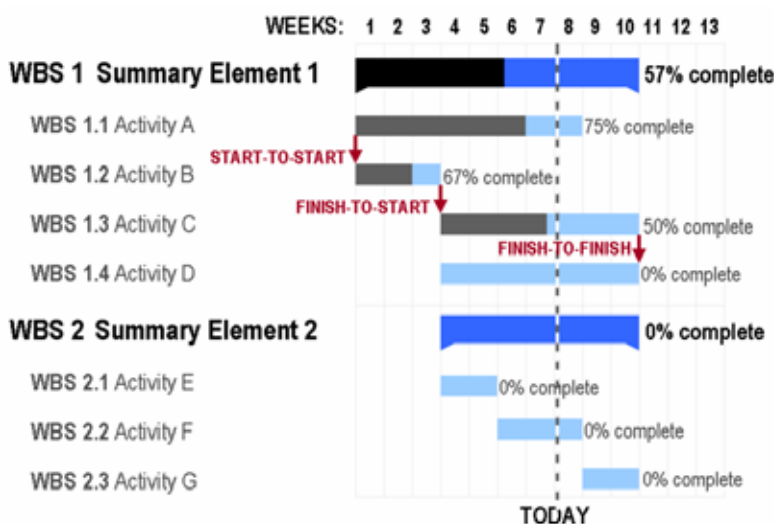


Fig. 1: Gantt chart from Wikimedia Commons

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:GanttChartAnatomy.png> (last accessed 20/06/08)

A general advantage of projects is that, in order to attract real public attention, they must have

- 4) public relevance
This feature makes university work generally accessible to the society and it makes English studies more embedded in our society today - and this society is, like many modern projects today, characterised by its
- 5) media-orientation
Despite the obvious dangers of the so-called New Media, I intend to emphasise the opportunities offered by recent technological developments, in particular the development of the interactive web, commonly called web2.0, for project work.
Because of this media-orientation, the traditional English teacher needs support from the IT specialist, which makes project work today often
- 6) an interdisciplinary effort
From a general educational (non-subject-related) perspective, project work includes many important skills that are often referred to as "soft skills". These have been emphasised lately particularly in the context of "employability" of graduates from the social sciences. Thus, the English Department is fortunate to have enough opportunities to include
- 7) an applied and job-related perspective
Ideally, project participants learn to organise their work independently and to take over responsibility for their component. Apart from that, however, they know that their contribution is important for the success of the whole group and still, the final product must be a unit that is more than the sum of the individual components alone. This implies
- 8) a new type of participatory learning
The real advantage of project work is that learning opportunities and job requirements are developing in the same direction here since the new technologies make a new project thinking possible that was unthinkable only a short while ago.

Project thinking and European requirements

From a theoretical perspective, project work must be embedded in a social-constructionist pedagogy, which includes collaboration, activity-based learning and critical reflection of one's own progress. This is probably the most important effect of project work in English Studies. I will take up this issue in my conclusion. This integration of new technologies and new thinking is also a European perspective, since it is very much in line with the "Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications" adopted by the European Commission in 2004 (Text 2). They state explicitly that "professional development programmes should reflect the importance of interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches to learning" (ibid: 5) and include innovative learning technologies (ibid: 3f):

Work with knowledge, technology and information: they need to be able to work with a variety of types of knowledge. Their education should equip them to access, analyse, validate, reflect on and transmit knowledge, making effective use of technology where this is appropriate. Their pedagogic skills should allow them to build and manage learning environments and retain the intellectual freedom to make choices over the delivery of education. These skills also allow for innovation and creativity. Their confidence in the use of ICT should allow them to integrate it effectively into learning and teaching. They should be able to guide and support learners in the networks in which information can be found and built. They should have a high level of knowledge and understanding of their subject matter and view learning as a lifelong journey. Their practical and theoretical skills should also allow them to learn from their own experiences and match a wide range of teaching and learning strategies to the needs of learners.

Text 2: European Commission: "Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications".

The following examples illustrate the possibilities (and occasionally limitations) of projects in English Studies in four major sections: of course, writing, translation, presentations and web resources. These categories can overlap, e.g. an academic writing project may be based on a translation and include a Wiki presentation using web resources. Finally, I will summarise the major concepts of this new way of learning again.

WRITING PROJECTS

Writing has always been an integral part of English studies at university level. Traditionally, the emphasis has been on "essay writing" or "composition", understood as an argumentative genre. The International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) rightly chose argumentative essays as the recommended genre for data-collections in English Departments around the world in an attempt to ensure compatibility. However, with respect to the criteria "public relevance", "media-orientation" and "job-related perspective" above, other genres are more important.

Journalistic Writing

Writing and particularly editing a journal is a special opportunity for students of English to go beyond the individual mini-projects that are the norm in English Studies. The necessity to finish a journal issue at a certain publication date and to start working on a new issue afterwards contributes to personal discipline and continuity. Continuity has always been a special problem for journals at English Departments as students have often not been able to contribute to the paper editions of Department Newsletters etc. during their year abroad. Nowadays, the WWW allows students to write particularly interesting and topical articles as

"foreign correspondents" during their year or semester abroad and provide useful first-hand information for the next generation of students going abroad, especially to ERASMUS partner universities.

The fact that student journals can be constructed relatively easily (e.g. in blog format) on the WWW nowadays at relatively low cost is an added advantage.



Fig. 2: WWW page of the TUC student journal

Academic Writing

Another important aspect that helps writing projects to become more directly integrated into the disciplinary specialisation of English Studies (language, literature and culture) is that student papers are usually written in the "foreign" language English nowadays. But English is not considered a "foreign" language even at German universities any more, as English is acknowledged more and more as *the* international language of science and technology. This makes it much easier for students of English to train their academic writing skills than for their fellow students of French, Spanish or Russian.

In addition, there are many WWW pages available for academic writing, mainly from American universities, where the problem "writing" has been an issue for many years. The advantage of English students is that they can profit from these (web) publications but the expansion of American concept to German and Czech universities is not easy, since the requirements for non-native speakers

are often different. The big debate in this context is whether the native-speaker norms should be taken over uncritically or whether European research traditions require different writing conventions. Although we still need more research in terms of culture-specific text-linguistic analyses of coherence or speaker involvement and speaker commitment for instance, these issues can be discussed in an advanced student forum since students of English have the advantage of being users and researchers in English for Academic Purposes at the same time. This is a unique opportunity to discuss the effect of academic writing on the intended readership. Whereas traditionally students concentrated on their own "papers" only, in a project approach they have to comment on the writing from a reader's perspective and thus learn that academic writing is clearly interaction – if it is to fulfil its purpose successfully (Hyland 2006). Whereas the collaborative aspect of this writing project is clear, the final product and time frame depends very much on the topic.

A Chemnitz example is a blog that students were asked to produce after a tour of Czech university Departments of English and language service providers. This study tour brought enough "input" for all participants and the differences between the two learning traditions provided much food for thought. Academic topics worth writing about included some very practical issues, such as the role of new media in teaching, future job perspectives and cooperation projects. Unfortunately, the output was limited, because self-organising mechanisms did not work as the study tour and the product based on it were not sufficiently integrated in the curriculum.

TRANSLATION PROJECTS

Similar to composition, translation has been a central part of language training in English Departments. Most translation exercises have tended to be "purely academic" in two senses, first the translations did not really have a specific readership and second purpose and the tools allowed were very restricted – often to a monolingual learners' dictionary. In "real life", however, translators work with a variety of media-based resources – and this could be reflected in today's university teaching, at least at the higher levels of language proficiency. Apart from the fact that translation projects can combine many student translations to a larger "marketable" unit, like a book, an exhibition catalogue or even film subtitles, students can learn to integrate technology.

Testing internet translations

Although every web user today has probably tried WW based translations, esp. with unknown languages, the results are usually so poor that these tools are not used seriously in translation projects. Testing the limitations of such machine translation tools is however a serious project. If different text-types, vocabulary

levels and languages are compared, students' language awareness (and admiration for good translations) can increase dramatically. They become aware of the creative choices of translators, who always have to decide whether to take the stereotypical or the unconventional options. A small test will also demonstrate that one of the more pervasive translation evaluation techniques, that of round-trip translation (or "back translation"), is also not very valuable since this may involve one direction that is relatively straightforward and one where problems arise. Although most WWW translations of European languages are based on Systran, some interesting differences can be investigated in a student project. It is of course possible to evaluate translations automatically using the standard style checkers, but the human evaluations can contribute a lot to discussions in translation classes. The "preliminary" results will also teach students to distinguish between texts where an automatic translation can be attempted despite the enormous "hand-work" involved in improving them and other texts where this should not be attempted at all. At least, this has a very practical sustainable result for individual students.

Using Translation Memory Systems

Other translation tools which are standard in industrial contexts but rarely used in university teaching today are translation memory systems. Although they are best suited for texts with many reoccurring parts, which can then be found in the system's memory, they are particularly suited for a project approach since they have to collect as much input text as possible to increase the chance of finding larger chunks that the translator can decide to re-use from a former translation. Obviously, a translation memory project would be most suited for user manuals or technical texts, maybe tourist texts are limited enough to be included into a special database. If the English Department could support local communities in providing English or even multilingual tourist brochures this would be a particularly good example of the criterion of public relevance and maybe of job-orientation.



Fig. 3: Example of a translation memory system (MetaTaxis)