REPORT ON FEASIBILITY STUDY ON THE USE OF FILM ADAPTATIONS IN DEVELOPING INNOVATIVE ASSESSMENT METHODS IN ENGLISH LITERARY STUDIES

Dr David Clark, School of English, University of Leicester
Email: dc147@le.ac.uk

1. BACKGROUND

This project derived from the principle that English literary study centres on the critical analysis of literary texts, and from Pope's (2005) argument that:

The best way to understand how a text works… is to change it: to play around with it, to intervene with it in some way (large or small), and then to try to account for the exact effect of what you have done. (p.1)

Lee (2006) had reported on an attempt to assess this claim 'by introducing English students to two film-making methods (digital video and computer animation)' and requiring them to make a film based on a literary text (or extract) chosen by them and then 'comment on how this could affect the way they analysed literature and how they saw this fitting into their perception of English literary studies.' (p.4) The report confirmed positive evaluations of the experience by both students and staff, but emphasised the need for courses to have 'the right support structures' (p.16) and institutional 'acceptance of such a teaching/assessment method' (p.17).

2. PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The funded project by means of consultation and discussion with relevant parties, and training on the part of the project director, aimed to assess the feasibility of introducing film adaptations of literary texts as an alternative means of assessment within a proposed 3rd Year Special Option 'Translating the Middle Ages into Film'.

The project had been intended to run alongside the initial delivery of the module (in traditional format) in Semester 1 of 2009/10. However, owing to a timetabling error, the module ran in Semester 2. Therefore, the report has been deferred until now to allow account to be taken of how the module ran and the essays produced by the students for their assessment.

The work to be undertaken was as follows:

1. Engage in consultation and discussion on the theoretical and practical issues with a number of internal and external colleagues.

2. Attend a film course, to enable me to teach the relevant techniques.

3. Read relevant research in this area and assess its implications for the proposed course and its assessment.

4. Assess the capabilities of Blackboard in consultation with UoL IT Services for the embedding of film technologies in the delivery and assessment of the course.

5. Consult with Jon Shears (Manager of UoL Multimedia Services) about the availability of equipment and training, and associated costs.

3. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

i) Work began with attendance at the OFVM 'Shooting Break' course – Oxford, 30th March to 3rd April 2009 (see attached summary). This was a very productive week and gave me a sound practical sense of how short films are planned and produced, as well as the upfront costs involved (see further below).

ii) Various consultations were made with a range of external and internal colleagues. The most crucial turned out to be that with Jon Shears (Manager of AVS Multimedia Services), which clarified the practical and financial issues involved with introducing film-making to a module.

Jon stressed the difficulty of formally assessing student film productions fairly. He pointed out that in ML, the film clip produced is formative. It enables students to get beyond the level of merely discussing what films omit in adapting literature, and understanding only that film is a visual rather than a verbal medium. They start to understand shot types, etc.

Jon suggested it was not possible to teach students enough about film technique within a literature module to make the assessment fair, pointing out that the French film clips are heavily AVS-led and supported. Film demands consideration of multiple aspects: soundtrack, acting, continuity, as well as the technical difficulties. This is different from Film or Media students, where their entire degree is centred on film: they would receive bespoke tutoring of 6 x 3-hour sessions on film-making charged at £1500, but with an actual cost (including AVS technicians' time) of around £10,000. These productions are assessed not on their ideas, but on their technical aspects, such as camera work, editing, sound and lighting. Within Media, it is assessed both on film techniques and the concept.

Staff-time and the equipment costs (not charged to the Department) make this very cost-heavy for the University, though AVS is happy to continue to support the existing modules. They are unable to take on new modules because of the resourcing implications.

Jon raised two other possibilities:

- to create a storyboard accompanied by dialogue and music, using Windows Movie Maker

-to create a sequence of still images to accompany a screenplay, using Powerpoint and digital cameras/phones.

If these were done individually, they could be assessed (Windows Movie Maker is designed to be used with minimal training).

Consultation with other sources, and particularly Dr Ann Miller (French), confirmed the picture Jon had given. In Dr Miller's module she runs a video project, which is done in groups and takes a day. Students re-film a short clip (2 minutes; the sequence is selected for them) in collaboration with AVS Multimedia Services (£300 direct cost). She reported that, although the students enjoy the filming, the storyboarding process is the real point, because framing, composition, lighting, etc, become real.

The large cost of film production seems to mitigate against its use on a School of English special option, given the small numbers involved. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to focus on the screenplay / storyboarding element, which turns out to be the more crucial from a pedagogical viewpoint anyway.

The alternative assessment therefore might include a screenplay / storyboard plus a short reflective piece. Consultation with Professor James Chapman (Film Studies) raised the possibility of students presenting a portfolio of work, equivalent to 5,000 words. This could include:

- 10 pages of screenplay

- notes on set, casting ideas, costumes sketches, etc.

- reviews of 500 words, etc.

- a short storyboard.

iii) As a result of reading the relevant research materials on film adaptation and preparing to run the module, the attached course outline was produced. The key feature is that it proved necessary to start off by introducing students to key terms and concepts in film studies, adapting handouts (attached) from colleagues which students could keep as targeted reference materials. The Film Worksheets (attached) were made available at each screening to ensure students engaged actively with the films. It was also found necessary to begin by studying the relevant source text before moving on to the adaptation, to ensure that students were engaging in detail with the specifics of adaptation. Once the relevant principles had been absorbed, it proved possible to move on to consider standalone films, or films that were less based on specific medieval texts.

The course outline was adapted in a number of ways as the module ran:

- the recent BBC Canterbury Tales was substituted for A Canterbury Tale (1944) in week 4, to provide a more contemporary picture to complement the Pasolini version, which students had found challenging.

- the option to repeat the screenplay exercise from week 4 was given in week 7 at the request of two students.

- the work on Kingdom of Heaven was brought forward by a week to enable the final week to be devoted to individual sessions where the students could discuss their essay ideas with me. Contact was made with Dr William Purkis (Birmingham), a Crusades specialist who recommended some materials to use for this session.

4. EVALUATION

The film adaptation exercise (outline notes attached) worked well. Two students requested the opportunity to repeat it, and welcomed the possibility of including it as an alternative assessment method in the future. One other student found the exercise difficult and uncongenial, confirming that this should be one option amongst others.

Overall, the project was a very positive and productive experience. Although I am disappointed that resource issues mean that actual short films are not a feasible assessment element, I look forward to including the screenplay/storyboard element the next time this module runs.

5. CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

I am now involved in a Creative Writing discussion group with other colleagues who use similar elements in their modules so that we can come up with standardized marking criteria and assessment feedback forms.

REFERENCES

Lee (2006)   Stuart D. Lee, 'New Tools for Creative Interpretation: An Investigative Study using Digital Video and Computer Animation. Project Report.' (English Subject Centre Mini Project). English Subject Centre, 2006. http://ltg.oucs.ox.ac.uk/esc

Pope (1995)   R. Pope, Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies. London: Routledge, 1995.