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The Provision of Children's Literature at Bishop Grosseteste University (Lincoln)

Sibylle Erle and Janice Morris

Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU), located in uphill Lincoln, was founded as an Anglican teacher training college for women in 1862. In 1962 it was named after the medieval Bishop Robert Grosseteste, renowned as a Church reformer and academic. In 2012 the institution, a University College since 2006, was awarded University status and the name changed to Bishop Grosseteste University. Although education and teaching courses still feature prominently, BGU now offers a wide range of subjects and qualifications. This professional article written by Sibylle Erle (Senior Lecturer in English) and Janice Morris (Teaching Resources Librarian) is a case study of the complexity of English Studies in the U.K., showcasing the provision of Children's Literature at BGU. The article, charting the collaboration between academic and librarian, consists of two parts. Part one is on the Children's Literature module and part two is on the history and development of BGU's working collection of literature for children as well as its provision of teaching resources for students studying in the School of Teacher Development.

Children's Literature, a second-year module, was created and taught by Dr. Sally Bentley until 2006. The module is mentioned in *Teaching Children's Fiction* (2006), edited by Charles Butler who also comments on the range of undergraduate Children's Literature modules at that time, listing Bentley's module as an example for "education students intending to become teachers". Bentley describes it as: "An 'overview' course in children's literature, including novels from a range of genres and periods (from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to contemporary Young Adult novels such as *Dear Nobody*), and a range of picture books by authors such as Sendak, Burningham, and Browne. Assessment: Seminar papers and a Timed Assessment."¹ Children's Literature is still a very successful module; it attracts highly positive feedback. It has, however, changed substantially over the years in its approach to student learning, academic content and assessment. These changes are a reflection

¹ Charles Butler (ed.) (2006) *Teaching Children's Fiction*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 189 and 190.

of the institution gaining University status in 2012 as well as the fact that the English Unit submitted to the RAE (2008) and the REF (2014). This focus on research has superseded the teacher education-oriented approach to both the module's delivery and content. Teaching is now research-led.

Until 2006 Children's Literature existed in two versions: one was delivered to BA Single Honours students and the other to the Combined Honours cohort. Due to BGU's long standing tradition of teacher education, the institution has always offered a whole range of assessments, oral and written, across the degrees to build up students' skills and knowledge. What the above mentioned "Seminar papers" entailed was an improvised oral presentation for the small cohort of Single Honours students. The much bigger group of the Combined Honours, on the other hand, had a substantially longer group assessment. It was a group presentation with a peer-teaching element. Students had to work and present in groups and were required to translate some of their academic work into a peer-teaching context. To prepare students for this component of their assessment, the lectures, which were normally 1.5 hours long, were interactive and group activities in seminars varied. Students were set independent study tasks. They had reading instructions for the workshops or questions for the seminars. I always tried to make students think about the pedagogic reasons behind the chosen exercises. During assessment students' choices of group tasks for their peers were highly imaginative. They were supported by additional teaching and learning materials which had to be handed in after the group presentation. The presentation groups received one mark and one feedback form. Individual marks were an exception. In the late 2000s, when BGU offered options to students the Single Honours module was phased out. Single Honours students were invited to opt into the Combined Honours version. Students would choose to do so, if they wanted to become teachers.

After revalidation, when the module moved from the first to the second semester, the peer-teaching element of the assessment ceased to exist. This change in direction had to do with the budding research culture at BGU. The module, once exceptional on account of its delivery, came to resemble the other English modules more and more. Other alterations were that the groups,

formerly consisting of up to seven students, would no longer receive a group mark. When I joined BGU in 2006 cohorts were smaller; the group mark was a means to acknowledge team-effort. Students formed their own presentation groups, based on friendship groups. Due to clashes in personalities or working styles, group work was often frustrating as well as productive and rewarding. Since student numbers had grown, it became a challenge to continually support the group work through tutorials or *ad hoc* meetings. With the prospect of individual marks the group process became easier to manage. Students were less anxious about their marks and were, as a result, more comfortable with the group work component. After the revalidation in the late 2000s the module began to evolve. Changes in timetabling led to one-hour lectures and 1.5 hour seminars. The module grew from 12 to 14 taught weeks, including two weeks for oral assessment, and an exam in week 15.

What stands out about Children's Literature now is that the module is student as well as research-led. The module still has lectures on specific themes, periods or critical approaches, such as the history of literature for children, Fairy Tales, Fantasy, Morality/Spirituality and text-image relationships. The taught component revolves around a reading list of normally 12 texts, starting with, for example, Sarah Fielding's *The Governess* (1749) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), and including poems by Isaac Watts and William Blake. The content now reflects my own research interests, such as Romantic literature, poetry, cultural materialism and reception studies. I also work on visual culture, which – with respect to the module – is reflected in the emphasis given to illustrations as well as picture books. The lectures are still concept driven. They promote intellectual flexibility and only touch on the texts to be discussed in the seminars. The aim is to raise questions about the seminar texts rather than just provide information about them. Lectures normally explore publishing contexts and publication histories to allow students to critically situate the texts they are studying. Issues to do with gender, race and sexuality are invariably introduced and discussed, focusing on modes of address and ideologies. Supported by Blackboard our VLE, students receive specific guidance on secondary reading as well as advance preparation and

thinking tasks. These tasks can form an integral part of the lectures or the seminars. The rationale behind this approach is to empower students to assess the suitability of specific approaches, such as biographical, textual and critical readings as well as reader response, for their analysis of literature written for children or young adults. The main goal of the sessions, in short, is to build students' confidence and to support their independent thinking. When it comes to choosing texts for the assessment, students need to have a sense of ownership of their projects.

Specific guidance on the oral assessment is given in weeks 1 and 4 of the module. In preparation for the assessment (weeks 7 and 8) students are expected to organise themselves into working groups by week 4 (3 to 5 students). Each group has to agree on a topic and each student is expected to present on at least one text and for 10 minutes in front of a small audience, including their peers and the assessor. The work for the group presentation is argument-driven. Students are encouraged to follow their own ideas but they have to be flexible; they have to weigh up their own interests against those of the group and plan their presentations accordingly. The argument of each individual presentation needs to link back and engage with the overarching argument. To give one example: if students choose the topic death, they need to agree on how each presentation will contribute to a critical analysis of the representation of death in contemporary literature for young adults. Each individual needs to find their own focus or angle to achieve this goal. Apart from insisting that students explore their research questions during tutorials, the assignment brief advises them to build their project around a theme, genre or issue. Students are expected to use ICT and are encouraged to consider film adaptations. They have to hand in individual reference lists as well as a print-out of their PowerPoint. To support the research component of the module, which invites students to work on new texts, Janice Morris, who is in charge of the Teaching Resources Collection (TRC), is included into the process. The tutorials, guiding and running alongside the group work, are part of an ongoing dialogue between academic and librarian. While some stick to the tried and tested authors, many seek out more obscure and less well trodden paths and the collection easily supports their choices.

The Teaching Resources Collection (TRC), originally founded for primary and secondary trainee teachers, is now used by all BGU students and staff. Students intending to work in education and students of children's literature have increasingly become dedicated users of the collection. The link with the Children's Literature module has grown and developed over the years.

When the Library was extended in 2012, we created a bespoke room for the TRC. This highlighted the importance of the collection and, together with the carefully chosen design and layout and the wonderfully illustrated panels by Jackie Morris and Ruth Brown, a space has been created that is highly regarded by students and staff alike. The TRC has two sections: the Teachers' Resources Collection and Children's Resources. The former includes National Curriculum documents, government reports, reading and phonic schemes, educational textbooks, teaching handbooks and lesson planning guides. The latter includes picture books, fiction and non-fiction books, big books, dual language books, feature films, audiobooks, resource packs, artefact boxes, novelty books, puppets, Storysacks® and journals. Within the Children's Resources we keep the Children's Literature Collection (CLC), the focus of this article. The purpose of this collection is to promote quality children's literature to BGU staff and students, to support their teaching and learning and to develop their knowledge of children's literature as well as their academic abilities. Created over the last 40 years, the CLC holds approximately sixteen thousand books and is wide ranging and inclusive. In the fiction and the picture book sections all the major authors and illustrators are represented. In addition, we have complete collections of the Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medal winners starting in 1936 and 1955 respectively. Our facsimile collection of Osborne Early Children's Books provides examples of pre-twentieth century children's literature. While our students can expect to find the classic authors, illustrators and poets, we are also painstaking in our efforts to keep the collection current. Each year we purchase the winners from a range of prizes and awards. So the CLC reflects the development of British children's literature over many decades. Geographically, although the emphasis is on British literature there is a good selection of American fiction, world fiction and books translated into English as well as dual language texts. While fantasy and other genres are

represented there are a number of themes running through our collections. Not only do we want our collection to be comprehensive and well balanced, we also want it to reflect diversity and equality.

In creating the collection we have used a variety of methods to guide and inform the selection: Children's Literature Journals, published bibliographies, prizes and awards, and professional organizations all inform our choices. Here are a few examples: *Books for Keeps* and *Children's Literature in Education* are useful journals which highlight various concerns and academic issues in relation to children's literature. The School Library Association (SLA) and the Federation of Children's Book Groups (FCBG) regularly publish bibliographies on a wide range of subjects. The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) Book Award, chosen by teachers; the Carnegie and Greenaway Medals, chosen by librarians; and the FCBG, Children's Book Award, chosen by children, give a comprehensive picture of contemporary children's literature from three very different but equally valuable perspectives. In addition, professional organizations, such as the National Association for Teachers of English (NATE) and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) provide information to support the promotion and teaching of children's literature.

However, it is important to consider and reflect on other factors that have influenced the development of the collection. Externally, government policies have had a considerable impact on its nature. The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 highlighted specific authors and books that schools should study; these all had to be present in our collection to support our teacher training students. The new National Curriculum, introduced in 2013, while stressing the importance of phonic knowledge for the teaching of reading, also emphasizes reading for pleasure and enjoyment. Changes in society and its values also impacted on the collection. For instance the emergence of teenagers as a distinct group, rapid technological change, appreciation of our increasingly multicultural society, acknowledgement of the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people and, very recently, government admission of the importance of emotional

wellbeing and mental health have all led BGU librarians, down the years, to select novels and picture books that reflect and explore the ways in which we live.

Internal changes at BGU also played their part in shaping the CLC. Changes in the student body, changes in the subjects taught and the qualifications awarded, combined with BGU's increasing focus on research, have all impacted on the collection. It has to support the demands of a whole host of courses. The introduction of early years education programmes, for example, have meant an increase in books for very young children. The recognition of our globalized economy and the need to internationalize the curriculum has triggered purchases, highlighting these issues. Academics' requests for particular texts to support their teaching and their specific research interests have also resulted in very positive contributions to the collection's development. Sibylle's promotion of poetry within the children's literature module has developed our poetry collection significantly.

Librarians over the years have also played their part in fashioning the collection. In my own case (and I have no reason to doubt that my predecessors were any different) my qualifications, experience and background have all affected my approach to stock selection. I am indebted to the specialist children's librarians employed by Walsall Library Service in the early 1980s who convinced me of the importance of children's literature. This was reinforced when I worked for Wiltshire School Library Service where I met personally or in print the authors, writers and children's literature experts who have helped form my vision for literature for children. Anthony Browne was the first author/illustrator to make me give picture books the attention they deserve. Other influences included Elaine Moss's seminal work from the 1970s which promoted picture books for older children and addressed the misconception that they are just for babies. Aidan Chambers produced wonderful books on engaging and encouraging children to read, and Teresa Cremin's work on teachers as readers has guided and supported my enhancement activities with students. All have been an inspiration and are integral to how I develop the CLC. Although we take care to create a comprehensive and balanced collection it is impossible to eliminate these haphazard, and

unpredictable influences. The CLC has been shaped by passing trends and reflects the interests, knowledge and values of all those who come into contact with it. Unlike many children's literature archives and specialist collections, it does not focus on a particular period or a single author. I consider that this is its strength. It has the breadth and depth to sustain our current teacher training students as well as our children's literature students and the potential to support many and varied research interests.

For final year English students, the number choosing to do their dissertations on children's literature is always high. Over the years, their research has focused on genres as well as important issues, such as disability, mental health and gender. As for our academics, Sibylle's interest and research in visual culture, mentioned above, has been illuminated by our extensive collection of picture books. Dr. Richard Woolley has used the collection to inform and provide examples for his book *Tackling Controversial Issues in the Primary School*. He also worked with myself and students on our BA Primary Education course to create the annotated bibliography, *The Family Diversity Reading Resource: 100+ picture books to value children's families annotated bibliography of picture books*. While Early Childhood Studies lecturer, Mary-Louise Maynes, has used the CLC to support her doctoral research on how children respond to books which challenge the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction.

To enhance our students' experience I work very closely with my academic colleagues to develop various activities. Such collaboration ensures that these are relevant and rigorous, adding to the students' experience rather than just being incidental to it. For example, each year we arrange for an author/illustrator to visit and work with English literature students, studying picture books on the children's literature module and also students on the Education Studies module, focusing on the value of 'informal' educational experiences. Afterwards, English Literature students interview the visiting author/illustrator for *Hullabaloo!*, a bi-annual paper and online children's literature newsletter published by the library which is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. For the second year running English Literature students from the Professional Placement module have

written, edited and published the spring/summer issue of *Hullabaloo!*. Along with bibliographies and leaflets developed in house and our Children's Literature LibGuide, *Hullabaloo!* helps to inform, and entertain our community at BGU. Finally, students who want to immerse themselves in children's literature have the opportunity to take part in shadowing the major book awards. Previously we have concentrated on the Carnegie and Greenaway Awards. This year a group taking Education Studies are meeting regularly to discuss the books shortlisted for the United Kingdom Literacy Association Book Award. What does the future hold? We very much hope that we can grow postgraduate work on literature for children, while continuing to support and inspire students of the undergraduate course.

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