Research, Pitch, Publish: Preparing comparative literature students for the creative industries

Abstract

Publishing and Comparative Literature is an advanced UG module designed to provide literature students with essential knowledge about the transnational publishing industry. One of the module's objectives is to give students the opportunity to produce a small-scale group publication, independently researched, directed at an audience, and to follow this through all stages of its publishing cycle. We shall present and discuss the rationale for developing this module within a discipline traditionally resistant to group assessments and unused to engagements with industry partners beyond creative practitioners, while also sharing examples of finished projects and including evidence of student engagement and learning experiences.

About the course

Inspired by UCL's educational framework The Connected Curriculum as outlined in Dilly Fung's *A Connected Curriculum for the Higher Education* (2017), in 2018 we got together to design a new advanced UG module for the then newly established BA Comparative Literature (SELCS, School of European Languages, Culture and Society). With our combined experience in the publishing business – as one of the directors of Norvik Press, a non-profit publisher based at UCL and specialising in Nordic literature, (Elettra) and with an extensive background in book history and transnational publishing research (Jakob) – we wanted to create a course that would allow literature students to gain knowledge on and, more importantly, authentic experience in publishing, an industry that many of our students express an interest in for future career opportunities.

As we set out to plan the course, the two main dimensions that guided us in outlining the learning objectives were not only dimension four – namely the need to 'connect academic learning with workplace learning' – but also dimension five focusing 'on the value for students of learning to produce "outputs"' or 'assessments directed at an audience' (Fung 2017: 84, 101). These dimensions translated into three specific learning objectives for the course:

- providing students with a comprehensive knowledge of the publishing industry and with practical skills that connect academic learning with workplace learning;
- combining a general understanding of the publishing context with the language and/or area studies expertise that the students have acquired in the course of their degree;
- allowing students to produce a small-scale publication directed at an audience and follow this through all stages of its publishing cycle.

Working on our course plan, we quickly realised that if we wanted students to fulfil these three objectives, we needed to work with less conventional structures and re-think the teaching in order to align this with the assessment for the course. This is how we came up with the current structure, which is a combination of lectures, seminars, practice-oriented workshops, group-tutorials and panel discussions with invited guest speakers from the publishing industry.

In the first seven weeks of the course, students are introduced to essential knowledge about the publishing industry. This includes: learning about the basic stakeholders and mechanisms in the publishing cycle; becoming familiar with the key concepts and trends in book history, translation and marketing; and discussing topics in publishing including colonial and postcolonial publishing, diversity and publishing in children and young adults' literature. In addition to getting a grasp on these theoretical issues, throughout the course students gain relevant practical skills by attending three two-hour workshops about how to use InDesign, the software used to design and layout publications, and are guided in shaping their assessed publishing project from the very first session.

About the assessment

As mentioned earlier, one of the aims of the course is that of taking the students through the publishing cycle of their own publication. Students learn from week one that the production of most publications is the result of collaboration and negotiation among several stakeholders. So how better to demonstrate this than by recreating this collaborative process as part of the course?

The assessment for the module consists, in fact, of a publishing project which students have to research, write, design, pitch and produce in small groups, while also carrying out individual research on an aspect of their chosen collective topic. Students are asked to write, design and typeset a cohesive publishing project on a topic of their choice relating to the broader field of publishing and comparative literature. Their publishing project can take the form of either an anthology of essays on a joint topic or a themed issue of an academic journal.

Embedding partnerships between students, staff and employers is an important principle behind the structure of our course. For this reason, halfway through the module, students are asked to do a Dragons' Den-style presentation to invited publishers representing different kinds of publishing houses such as Penguin, Pushkin Press, and UCL Press. This allows students to get authentic, constructive feedback from people working in the industry before submitting their publications.

In a discipline traditionally resistant to group assessments, students can at times feel anxious about the idea of being evaluated as a group, especially as many of them have had little or no experience of this type of assessment before embarking on our course. We found however that the following two strategies have proved very effective in helping the students overcome any initial hesitations about working and being assessed in groups:

- having very clear guidelines about how to approach the development of the publishing project and making sure that students are supported in different and relevant ways on a week-by-week basis. To get an insight on how we have scaffolded this process, you can check out our Working on your project: A week-by-week outline;
- finding a balance between groupwork and individual work. In practical terms, this has meant spitting the publishing project into different components: group components, where students receive a collective mark for their work, and an individual component, which students need to research and write independently and for which they receive an individual mark. This combination of group and individual work allows students to work together in creating a volume that is cohesive and visually coherent while also

developing their own individual research interests. To see how we have organised the assessment for this course, you can have a look at our Assessment summary.

About the students

The best way for us to evaluate the success of this module and its assessment has been the quality of the students' work. In the past four years we have seen original and beautifully-designed student projects which have explored a range of topics around diversity in publishing and comparative literature studies. Examples of projects so far include: publishing and freedom of speech, the relationship between publishing and activism, diversity in children's and adult's literature, the uses of social media in publishing, questions around digitalisation and accessibility, the role and uses of translation in publishing, and publishing and the visual medium.

It is clear from the student engagement we have witnessed and the feedback we have received so far that students appreciate modules that may help them prepare for the workplace and that engage them as researchers, while promoting creativity and diversity of thought. In their answers to their end-of-year evaluation questionnaires, feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, mentioning the course's 'vocational focus', the collaborative nature of the assessment and, last but not least, the possibility to interact with guest speakers and pitch their projects to a panel of experts from the industry as highlights. Students particularly appreciate the less-conventional structure of the course designed to support their group and individual work, 'the clear communication of the expectations and assignments'.

As the consultation process on the new UCL Strategic Plan 2022-27 is well under way, it is evident from the discussion papers that the values and principles of The Connected Curriculum remain embedded in the university's Education priorities and programmes. As we are encouraged to consider how to best prepare our graduates 'for entering, leading and shaping the workplaces of the future and for the challenges they are likely to face in their lives', we hope to have contributed with this blog post based on our experience from this course to discussions on how to achieve this (4).

Negotiating individual research interests with those of a broader editorial board, learning how to design and layout a publication from scratch, and pitching publishing project ideas to real publishers and editors can appear like dauting tasks to students at the beginning of the course. However, with the appropriate support within and outside of the classroom, we have seen four cohorts of students become energised by the experience. Students are ultimately proud of the result of their work, and, by the end of the course, they feel they have gained new work-related skills.

As they get ready to apply for jobs and/or postgraduate studies, students can add to their CVs and covering letters that they have already researched, pitched and published a volume of their own. And as we continue to review the course on the basis of student feedback, our next step is likely to be that of finding a suitable way to share with outside audiences the wonderful publications created by our students.