

Teaching American Studies in a Changing World Environment

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American Studies is changing both as a discipline and in its place within the academy. While this paper principally reflects my experiences in teaching American Studies and American history in England, my observations may also have salience for practitioners in other countries and in other disciplines. American Studies specialists in universities which do not have American Studies departments face a particular set of challenges since many of their students lack the academic background in the range of subjects upon which they might otherwise draw. They will probably have little or no academic background in American history, literature, politics, or other specialties, and are possibly taking only one or two courses on the United States. They frequently bring misconceptions about the United States to their study of the American experience, believing that they know American culture because they have seen American television programs or movies. In these troubled times such students may also have an anti-American viewpoint and feel angry about current American political and military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Israel, and other global hotspots (Ferguson).

Because I have taught American Studies and American History both in History and American Studies departments in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and United States I am very conscious of the differences students in these countries bring to their examination of the United States. I also teach a study abroad course to engineering students from Iowa State University, who use it to fulfill one of their Humanities requirements. Broadly speaking, the German students in American Studies (mostly post-graduates) had by far the widest knowledge of American culture and were quite well informed on specific historical matters. The British students (primarily in the Politics and History programs) were at a less advanced stage of their academic careers (mostly undergraduates), taking my courses either out of general interest or because they are required of all History majors.

Many people across the globe objected to U.S. foreign policy directions during President George W. Bush's administration, yet the Politics and History students I teach welcomed the opportunity to put his foreign policy into historical perspective. About 20 - 25 percent of my students had studied specific American topics in secondary school, typically the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War, so they had some knowledge of these areas but lacked a wide-ranging knowledge of the United States. Some had studied literature as part of their secondary school education. (Approximately 25 percent took it as an A-level). This group might have read several American novels, but not necessarily had much historical contextualization as part of their literature studies. While some History and Politics students enjoyed the American Studies approach which integrates culture into the curriculum, others preferred to stick to what they saw as 'the facts,' a chronological

narrative of U. S. history. The engineering students from Iowa State University who take my course on Women in the United States through a combination of distance and on-campus learning have the broadest knowledge of the United States and its institutions by virtue of their having grown up in the United States. Their choice of an undergraduate degree in engineering meant that most of them had little contact with formal historical study or literature since some time in high school. They nevertheless have a broad historical and political base on which to build their intensive study of gender in the United States.

This paper is framed by a number of concerns, which for ease of discussion I will separate into the general categories of institutional and pedagogical. The institutional concerns are perhaps more relevant to the British academic scene than to Americanist scholars in other countries. Since they constitute the background against which this paper is written I will discuss the institutional issues first, especially the growing monitoring of research activities that characterizes higher education today. In particular, the incessant evaluation of research has a negative impact on teaching throughout higher education in Britain (and, one suspects, elsewhere). Scholars in other countries perhaps enjoy more stable academic structures and thus do not have to contend with the seemingly perpetual revolution in higher education management which characterizes the United Kingdom. However, one only needs to read the international news stories in the (London) *Times Higher Educational Supplement* or the (American) *Chronicle of Higher Education* to be aware of the increased tensions between teaching and research in other parts of the world.

The Institutional Framework

I teach in a medium-sized British university on the western edge of London which has a racially and religiously diverse student body. Along with many British universities, we are caught up in a cycle of financial uncertainty because the government continually reinvents the financial regime in which we operate. It has done this through several different mechanisms. Since the present Labour government came into power it has imposed tuition fees, first about £1000 (in 1998) and then to a maximum of £3000 (for home undergraduates) in 2006, with the lingering suspicion that fees may go higher in the future. This act applies to students in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, but not to those in Scotland. Scottish students still enjoy free university education if they study in their own country, although they do have to pay a contribution toward their costs once they graduate ("Q&A"). The Higher Education Act of 2004 instituted a system of loans to replace direct grants to students. This has resulted in a situation where most students graduate with a significant amount of debt. At the same time, the government has aspired to have 50 per cent of school leavers (high school graduates) attend university. This represents a quantum change from the situation of twenty or forty years ago, when about 20 percent and 10 per cent of the population, respectively, went to university in Britain. One consequence of this is that staff student ratios have deteriorated markedly (*Times*, 3 November 2006).

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Many of the new university entrants come from households where they are the first family member to obtain higher education. Not surprisingly, these families are more vocationally oriented than households from which previous generations of students came. Despite government efforts to broaden the educational base in terms of student numbers, what we have seen in the latest admissions and application data is that there has been a slight drop in the overall number of students going into higher education in Britain. This decrease was about 4 percent in 2006 compared with 2005, although this may be a blip, since applications rose in 2007. It is possible that the higher education market will adjust in years to come (*Times*, 27 October 2006; Smith, A.)

Students in the present funding climate seem less willing to take degrees in American Studies than in the past. Many do not perceive it as a 'vocational' subject. And perhaps in these days of tuition fees and anti-American sentiment potential students are unwilling to devote three or four years to studying the history and culture of a country they perceive as inimical to world peace and environmental safety. At any rate, there has been a 25 percent decrease in the number of students applying for American Studies degrees since the higher tuition fees came into effect in 2006 (University). Mature students have been hit especially hard by these funding changes. When I started teaching American Studies in Britain twenty years ago about 20 percent of our students were over the age of twenty-five. Such students frequently took American Studies because they had traveled or lived in the United States or just regarded it as an interesting area of study. They brought a wealth of experience to their studies and contributed to some very lively discussions in lectures and seminars. We now have many fewer mature students, which diminishes one aspect of diversity in our classrooms.

The fate of American Studies at my own university illustrates the impact of these trends - increased scrutiny of publications and a (hopefully temporary) decline in the number of American Studies students and courses - particularly in smaller institutions and those with a lower research ranking. I became the head of the American Studies program in 1987 at the West London Institute of Higher Education. The program itself had been in existence since the early 1980s. As was common amongst American Studies programs in British colleges and polytechnics (but not in the old universities) it had a small academic staffing base. We had 3.5 FTE (full time equivalent posts), an historian, a literature specialist, a sociologist and part of a theologian. Such a small staffing base was common in many American Studies programs in British colleges and polytechnics. One consequence of these small numbers was that individual programs were very sensitive to staffing changes. If a member of staff left, he or she might not be replaced. It was also common in the UK to have American Studies as a cross-departmental program, typically housed either in the History or Literature department and dependent upon the goodwill of those staff to make them viable. Small student numbers in American Studies courses sometimes made them look peripheral in an institution's drive to increase enrollments and therefore easy to terminate in the frequent restructuring exercises that seem to beset British higher education.

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In the early 1990s the British government, which closely controls higher education policy in the United Kingdom, decided to allow polytechnics to call themselves universities. This drew the former polytechnics and colleges into direct competition with universities for funding and students. It also meant that previously quite small American Studies departments or programs competed directly with the larger universities for students and for research funds. Inevitably, some departments closed, although others managed to survive, largely through joint honors programs with other subjects (University, 2007).

There is one other aspect of higher education in Britain that contributed to it the decrease in American Studies programs. Since the late 1980s the government has mandated a research assessment exercise, known by its initials, RAE, which occurs every five to seven years. The RAE evaluates the research of all academics in the United Kingdom on a departmental basis. Each department or program receives a score based on a rating of each individual's research, the amount of grant money received, number of postgraduate students, number of completed PhDs, and the somewhat less tangible "research culture." The government began this ranking system in order to prove that research funds were not being used to subsidize teaching and to show that the public was getting value for money from the academic staff of its universities. It made small programs more vulnerable because they had fewer staff and were less likely to have doctoral programs or obtain research grants. A number of these programs closed because they received lower research rankings.

In the late 1980s there were over fifty American Studies programs or departments in the United Kingdom. There are now around forty. In other words, the UK has lost about one-fifth of its teaching capacity in American Studies over the last twenty years, with most of that loss being in the last ten years. Most of the abolished departments were in the former institutes and colleges of higher education and polytechnics, which traditionally took students with lower A-level scores than the old universities. This means that students who are perhaps less academically able are being denied the opportunity to do American Studies.

I would like to use the experience of American Studies at my own university to explain the impact of the RAE and the "bigger is better" psychology which underpins it. English, Northern Irish, and Welsh universities admit students directly into a particular degree subject, rather than just into the university. This forces such students to make up their minds about what to study the year before they leave secondary school. Scotland offers an interesting contrast, with an educational model that more closely resembles that of United States. Students in Scotland study more subjects for their "Highers" than English, Northern Irish and Welsh students do for their A-levels. Scottish universities admit students into a Faculty, where they study for two years before applying for admission into a single or joint honors degree. They thus have a broader educational base. Scotland also, and perhaps not coincidentally, has not witnessed the same decline in American Studies as in the rest of the United Kingdom (Newman).

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The small college at which I taught in the 1980s and 1990s merged with a larger university nearby that did not have an American Studies department. American Studies at West London Institute had a student intake of about ninety, mostly joint majors with another subject. We had a centralized admissions system whereby students were admitted to one subject and then encouraged to take a second subject even if they did not apply with one in mind. For example, a student who wanted to do sports sciences or English and needed a second subject might be interested in doing American Studies along with it. Our system worked reasonably well until the introduction of single honors degrees, when students no longer had to take two subjects to degree level. At that point, American Studies experienced some difficulty in recruiting students.

The University with which we merged (Brunel) had a different intellectual climate. It did not favor the double major approach, which, it was felt by administrators, made the construction of individual students' timetables more difficult. In the days of teaching audits and national benchmarking for subject content and program structure, it was harder to defend the diversity of American Studies to national inspectors of teaching quality. The university also looked askance at small teaching units and those with more modest RAE scores. During the last academic reorganization the university senate – comprised of department heads, senior university administrators, a few elected academics, and ex-officio observers such as the presidents of the students' union – decided to abolish the American Studies program, because of our average research rating and the decline in American Studies applications in the UK as a whole. We went from being a middle-ranking American Studies program which pretty well held its own in terms of research and student numbers and which was well taught, to teaching out the students on the course and the dispersal of the academic staff to several different schools within the university. The closure was completely rational in terms of university decision making, but at the same time it highlights how vulnerable small programs can be and how research pressures could undermine good teaching departments, especially in interdisciplinary areas

The methodology used to assess these frequently small interdisciplinary programs hastened their demise, by making it more difficult for interdisciplinary programs to achieve good results. Or as the current information to higher education institutions admits, "there have been concerns that the assessment of interdisciplinary research has presented challenges in previous RAEs" (Higher 12). How could three or four people have a research culture? How could the number of grants they got (if any) compare with those from the academic heavy hitters, the departments with twenty or thirty staff? Small departments tended not to have post-graduate students. Indeed, there are only twenty post-graduate programs that offer anything like an American Studies approach in the United Kingdom, and a number of those are actually either history or literature or film studies (Eccles). Despite a lively postgraduate community, the structure of British academe has enforced a restructuring of American Studies, a concentration in the larger departments, and a return to single-discipline teaching.

Another consequence of the RAE is that the need to produce more and more publications squeezes out intensive student-centered teaching. This compounds the pressure put on teaching by larger student numbers and has resulted in much disquiet, especially among students. Teaching may matter even less if the national higher education bureaucracy succeeds in forcing the arts and social science RAE panels to make metrics the basis of research evaluation. The model is drawn from the sciences (never mind the quality, feel the width) where short papers are the norm and journals seemingly can be ranked in order of prestige. In the humanities (and some of the social sciences), where books are the norm, this might entail either a formal or covert ranking of university and other presses. The items won't necessarily be read (panels vary in this regard); only the scores will be totted up, including the number of grants one has received, in a highly competitive system where about 20 - 25 percent of grant applications to the Arts and Humanities Research Council receive funding. This system is widely perceived as a device to concentrate research cash into the larger universities and departments. It will put more money into the hands of the big players, the Oxfords, Cambridges, Warwicks, and Nottinghams, and take it away from the colleges, the lower ranked universities, and those with small American Studies programs. The arts and social science community is fighting this method of assessment, so it may not come to pass. If it does, it will further undermine the teaching and research balance that used to exist in British universities. According to one correspondent of the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, it will consign many "excellent teachers who have done research that is perfectly good, but not of international standard" to the scrapheap (Moss).

Teaching itself becomes a less valued part of the job under this approach to higher education. To be sure, it is the one that gives the most satisfaction and direct feedback to academics and certainly is one of the most important aspects of the student experience. Nevertheless, it does not **count** for much. The Teaching Quality Assessments which occurred in the 1990s never had any cash attached to them. They ranked departments' teaching provision, overall level of resources, and university quality control mechanisms, but they were fundamentally different from the RAE which brings in cash to those departments who are rated as 'internationally excellent.' The RAE methodology does not give any indication of how much cash will be attached to any particular grade, but in the past, the funding formula altered after the assessments were conducted and the scores made public.

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Regardless of discipline or the external pressures regarding research, most academics believe it is their job to help students put the knowledge they gain about a subject into perspective. Americanists seek to enmesh the history, literature, or popular culture of the United States (the most common American Studies course areas) into a broader understanding of American society. In one of the first considerations of what American Studies actually was, Henry Nash Smith queried in 1957 whether American Studies could develop a methodology. He concluded that there was "no ready-made method for American Studies in sight." Instead, he urged that American Studies be conceived "as collaboration among men working from

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within existing academic disciplines but attempting to widen the boundaries imposed by conventional methods of inquiry” (Smith, H. 207). Leaving apart his gendered assumptions as not entirely accurate in the 1950s and certainly not now, Smith urges us to incorporate a number of disciplines into our study of the United States. For students outside the U. S. this means introducing geography, politics, economics, and sociology, as well as literature, popular culture, history, and other disciplines in order to provide essential background knowledge. Most American students living in the USA obtain at least some of this knowledge in school and from living in the country, but students in other nations rarely have the opportunity to do this. Thus American Studies outside the United States has a remit that involves providing a rounded view of America and Americans. That, in turn, means going beyond one discipline; it also increasingly means setting the U.S. in its transnational or global context.

Indeed, one of the key points that we and our students may raise is the extent to which the United States really can be considered as an exceptional nation, one that has superior political, economic or social systems, an idea which many regard as central to the founding - if not the contemporary practice of - American Studies. As one American Studies text puts it, “originating as a proponent of U.S. exceptionalism during the Cold War, American Studies has now reinvented itself, vigorously critiquing various kinds of critical hegemonies and launching innovative interdisciplinary endeavors.” (Pease and Wiegman). Many historians take issue with Alexis de Tocqueville’s characterization of the United States in the 1830s as an egalitarian society -at least for whites (Pessen; Beard; Thomas). Studies of race, class, gender, and ethnicity all indicate the extent to which the United States was and is a society in which inequality is as deeply embedded as elsewhere across the globe, if not more so (Shipler; Amott and Matthaei; Etzioni.). Various scholars have also noted that U. S foreign policy has long been regarded as imperialistic, so that its current ventures overseas have an established pedigree and do not constitute an exception to the general trend of American foreign relations (Briggs; Kaplan). Thus the question of whether America is or ever was exceptional and the resentment it evokes in many contemporary students outside the United States can become part of what we analyze in American Studies or other classes we teach on the U.S.

In addition to the students I teach in History and Politics at Brunel, I also teach an annual summer course to engineering students from Iowa State University who come to my university to take intensive engineering courses and to travel in Europe. The Iowa State students present a particularly interesting challenge from an American studies point of view since they are foreigners to the worlds of academic history and American Studies, even though they are almost all born in the United States. They are highly intelligent students who relish the challenge of a humanities class, or at least tolerate it because it fulfils a requirement of their degree program. It is not possible nor is there any intention to teach them everything about the United States in the space of one course. Instead, we focus on selected topics driven by their interests, using as many different resources as possible in order to contextualize and situate the topics in American history and culture.

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I find it useful to assign these students readings from other disciplines which not only help to illuminate the grand forces of history, but also draw upon their own experiences and interests as engineers. For example, in discussing industrialization, urbanization, and immigration we might focus on the steel industry. Certain literary texts bring alive the experiences of working-class families in a far more profound way than I do as an historian. I sometimes set Thomas Bell's *Out of This Furnace* (1941) against my own historical analysis of steel workers' families, *The Shadow of the Mills* (1989), in order to emphasize the impact of immigration and industrial capitalism on ordinary people. Bell illuminates the human cost of industrialization which can be contrasted to the tons of steel produced, the census pages which show occupations and family structure, and the narrative accounts of industrial development such as *The Shadow of the Mills* or David Brody's *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (1960). Primary sources including Crystal Eastman's 1907 investigation into *Work Accidents and the Law* and John Fitch's analysis of the steel industry, *The Steel Workers* (1911), both commissioned by the Pittsburgh Survey and provide contemporary accounts of industrialization and its cost.

These works also underline the gendered dynamics of employment and family life in different economic settings. The characters in Bell's novel are fictionalized versions of his own family. His accounts of steelworkers' lives and the deplorable accidents they endured closely follow labor newspapers' descriptions of events in and around the mills, which can be compared to Eastman and Fitch's accounts. The students empathize far more with the protagonists, Mike and Mary Dobrejcek, than they do with my graphs of accident statistics and tonnages of steel produced. While *Shadow* provides patterns, historical context, and an overview of industrial cities, Bell's novel focuses on the micro level and has much more emotional impact on readers who get caught up in the story.

I also use the U. S. Census in manuscript form to help students understand how numerical data are constructed and to encourage them to put themselves in the shoes of nineteenth-century farm workers or recent immigrants to the United States. Such material needs to be photocopied from census microfilms, which do not readily reproduce, or it can be accessed on various websites. Students actually get to see where and how people lived, how households supported themselves, and the variations between groups. This helps them to link quantitative data (the tabular presentations of census information) with the qualitative insights they derive from Bell in order to understand the impact of urban industrial life upon its residents. They can see for themselves the overcrowding, the high levels of youth employment, and the contrasts between various economic and social groups. Using American Studies' interdisciplinary methodology broadens and enriches students' understanding of the United States and the factors which shaped people's lives in America. The census gives raw numbers and general tables; Bell makes these personal; mine and other secondary analyses contextualize the information. Even taken together, these works do not present the whole picture of industrialization, but they do (hopefully) give students the analytical tools to investigate other aspects on their own.

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There is one other factor to mention in regard to the declining number of students enrolled on American Studies programs, namely the anti-Americanism which has emerged in the 21st century, but whose roots go back much farther. No matter what one thinks of the conflagrations in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Lebanon, they have done little to endear the United States to large swathes of people across the globe. It is my guess that few potential undergraduates when applying to university think, 'oh, goody, I hate that country and what it is doing across the world, therefore I will apply to spend three or four years studying it and its culture.' My undergraduate U. S. History survey course is required of all history majors at my university. Thus the students seem to bring less of an enthusiasm for the United States than did previous generations of American Studies students. They may well have less interest in or knowledge about the United States when they come into my classroom. It is my job to infuse them not necessarily with a love of the United States, but with an understanding of the country, its culture, and its politics.

So, how does one teach American Studies to students who do not know they are studying it and may not be particularly interested in or sympathetic to the American Studies project? When many of us were students or young academics we believed that the United States was exceptional and perhaps even exceptionally good. Now, perhaps we can say that while the Cold War may have ended, history has not. New enemies and conflicts have taken the place of the old ones, with religion closely intertwined with politics and international relations. This requires Americanists to place the United States in a transnational perspective and make no claims for its exceptionalism.

We cannot assume that the students in our classrooms are sympathetic enquirers into a benign American project. Because I teach in a combined politics and history department and my first and second-year courses are required of all students I see many undergraduates who range from truly interested to less than enthusiastic or overtly hostile to American history/American Studies. Some resent being forced to take my second-year module entitled Gender in Early America, believing that "that sort of stuff" is either boring or not real history or both. My approach to this has been to assume that they are interested in the subject or are sufficiently worried about their grades to pay reasonable attention to the subject matter. Yet it is also incumbent upon me to explain how gender is fundamental to understanding U.S. history (Kleinberg, Boris, and Ruiz) and how the United States has developed.

One part of my approach has been to incorporate literature into the study of history. What I find fascinating is that when I integrate literature into my history classes some students participate more fully in the class than if I merely assigned them yet another history text. If they begin to hear other voices and other perspectives on what they regard as "the facts, ma'am, just the facts" they may begin to open up to a more rounded understanding of the United States.

Taking this approach presents its own challenges since many of them will not have studied any literature for a number of years. The British educational system forces young people to specialize in three or four subjects at the age of sixteen, although Scottish pupils take a broader range of subjects in high school. My

historians, political scientists, and engineers frequently approach *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston or Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as documentary texts in U. S. history, not as literary texts. While some of these students lack the finely honed skills of *littérateurs*, they apply themselves to the novels as illuminating a historical period or re-creating a set of "truths" about race and gender. Their readings thus complicate and disturb the historical narrative of intra- and inter-racial relations and act as fertile jumping off points for discussions. Above all else, they encourage students to see the specificity of conditions that gave rise to a particular set of circumstances (the historical side, if you will) and contrast it with the artistic imagining (the cultural side). One hopes the net result is a deeper understanding of a particular time or issue, such as slavery and its legacy illuminated and contextualized by historical and cultural studies.

Because a number of my students are politics students taking my course as an elective I try to use social science as well as literary approaches. This works particularly well in seminars where I distribute photocopies of the U. S. census and ask the students to work in groups to determine what kind of information they can get from this particular primary source. This leads into fruitful discussion of immigration, migration, children's and women's labor, and family structure. While one cannot generalize about economic and social life in a particular setting from just looking at a single page of the census the exercise helps students to understand the people behind the data and the social, economic and political movements about which I lecture. It also helps them to interrogate the construction of the sources they use.

Examining the manuscript census complicates categories. What do students make of the family headed by a recently widowed, thirty-eight year old woman born in Germany, who came to the United States when she was eighteen, when they see that her seven living children are described as "Black"? What, for example, does this tell them about the construction of race in the United States or the diversity of its population? All we know about her late husband was that he was born in Virginia. Their two oldest sons, ages twelve and fourteen, worked in the iron mills. Her seven-year-old daughter was at school, while Mrs. Stott looked after her three youngest children (5, 3, and 1) and a boarder, an African American millwright born in West Virginia. Their next-door neighbors were another interracial couple in their forties. He was a sexton. She had no occupation listed; nor did she have any living children. The neighbors on the other side of the Stotts were an older married couple (in their seventies) who had never had children. The husband was born in Pennsylvania, the wife in England. He was a day laborer who had been unemployed for one month in 1900 (U. S. Census).

While I could go on describing the households in this particular steel mill district of Pittsburgh the point here is that students have to use their knowledge and their imaginations to come to some understanding of the forces shaping the lives of these three households and the others nearby. The blend of methodologies discussed in this paper (literary analysis, historical narrative, quantitative and qualitative analysis of census data) combine to contextualize the literature and use literature to enrich the historical narrative. This range of tools and sources

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incorporates the broad sweep of American Studies methodologies into the study of American history. It also seeks to overcome the distance some students feel from that history and from the United States itself. Thus American Studies' interdisciplinary methodology broadens and enriches students' understanding of the United States, even if they are not enrolled in an American Studies program.

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