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Why *‘*Teach*’* Beckett?

In their book *Integrating Pedagogy and Technology*, James Bernauer and Lawrence Tomei identify ‘Philosophy: What are we teaching? Psychology: How do we teach? Sociology: Who are we teaching? History: When (in the history of education) are we teaching?’ and ‘Leadership: Who are the key advocates of education?’ as the ‘pillars of teaching and learning’ (2015, 3–4). It is not surprising that the question ‘what are we teaching?’ takes precedence in this list, as it forms the foundation for course evaluations and revalidations. In an era dominated by the discussion surrounding the value of the arts and humanities, especially in higher education in the United Kingdom, where the number of students taking literature is in decline and where ‘STEM’ subjects appear to dominate, we may ask ‘Why teach literary studies?’

Those of us who teach in the arts and humanities recognise the value of what we do, not just in cultural terms but socially and economically. In a recently published article in *The Guardian*, entitled, ‘Why study English? We’re poorer in every sense without it’, Susanna Rustin states, ‘I chose English because the way literary forms could be used to convey ideas and feelings interested me more than anything else’ (2019). And Rick Rylance, in his book *Literature and the Public Good*, addresses the value of literary studies, claiming that ‘Alongside potentially quantifiable benefits to well-being of a therapeutic or developmental kind, literature, and the arts generally, give a more unformulated sense of emotional and spiritual prosperity, and of the fertility of human experience’ (2016, 27). We recognise that literature has the ability to be transformative, but in the current climate of higher education in the United Kingdom, where more and more emphasis is being placed on progression and retention rates, and curriculum design is focused increasingly on widening participation and ‘employability’, what is the motivation, in a culture geared towards student satisfaction, for adding Samuel Beckett to the curriculum? The importance of experiential learning is key here, as my own experience of studying Beckett had a profound impact on my career pathway and eventual pedagogical approach to learning and teaching. David Kolb states that ‘Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’ (1984, 38), a point that has application for the phenomenological accounts of teaching Beckett detailed here. With the emphasis on why, as opposed to how, this article adopts a qualitative approach from the positionality of the Beckett educator within an Anglophone-Irish context; from this fundamental methodological position, subjective evidence is used to offer some substantive observations regarding the study of Beckett and education.

With reference to James Joyce, Morris Beja suggests that ‘When we set out to teach *Ulysses*, its reputation works for and against us. It works for us because it often attracts students who are eager to confront the book; it works against us because students may feel daunted – even fearful’ (1993, 129). My experience of teaching Beckett over the past number of years is analogous. Increasingly we face two obstacles: students who have never heard about Beckett and those who view his work as being synonymous with difficulty and inaccessibility. Hence, when the idea of developing an optional module solely dedicated to Beckett’s work was mooted during a course committee meeting in 2014, it came as no surprise when one colleague asked, ‘but who will sign up for that?’ Ironically, it was as an undergraduate at the University of Ulster that I first encountered Beckett via *Waiting for Godot*, which formed part of a generic module. I remember purchasing my copy of the play in Waterstones (a British bookshop) in Belfast and beginning to read it on the bus journey home. Neither the play nor the lecture which followed fuelled my imagination, and if this had been my only encounter with Beckett, I would never have ventured into the oeuvre willingly again. However, the impact of watching *A Wake for Sam* (BBC, 1973) with Billie Whitelaw’s introduction of *Not I,* followed by her performance, radically altered my perception of Beckett, and in that moment my understanding of what literature/drama could be expanded. This encounter in the second year of my degree, followed by an exploration of *Happy Days,* precipitated my choice of an optional ‘Special Author Study’ module in my final year and eventual doctoral study of Beckett’s work.

In *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (2003), L. Dee Fink declares that ‘The central idea of this phrase is that teaching should result in something others can look at and say: “That learning experience resulted in something that is truly signiﬁcant in terms of the students’ lives”’ (6). He continues by detailing the characteristics of significant learning experiences, in terms of results, impact and outcomes, defining a course as having significant and lasting change when it ‘results in signiﬁcant changes in the students, changes that continue after the course is over and even after the students have graduated’ (Fink, 2003, 6–7). However, is the resultant impact of these significant learning experiences quantifiable? 2006 marked the centenary of Beckett’s birth: ‘Throughout the world, academic conferences and performances of his work demonstrated the enormity of his impact on international literature and theatre’ (McMullan and Wilmer, 2009, 1). Nevertheless, the question remains, what is the impact of his work within the classroom? Writing to Stephen Block, in March 1968, Beckett expressed his inability to write or speak about his work, claiming, ‘My only contact with it is from the inside and I understand very imperfectly the effect it has on readers and critics’ (Beckett, 2016, 120). Hence this article turns its attention to the question raised by Jonathan Heron and Nicholas Johnson in this journal in 2014 in their introduction to ‘the Performance Issue’, namely, ‘In the problematic discourse around “impact” in measuring academic contributions, what is the weight of a student mind changed by an encounter with Beckett in a term paper, a lecture, or a studio?’ (Heron and Johnson, 2014, 8).

Measuring the weight of a mind changed by encountering Beckett’s work is timely, especially within the United Kingdom context, considering that the next Research Excellence Framework exercise in 2021 has expanded the definition of ‘impact’ to include impact on students and teaching.1 Evaluating my own pedagogical practice throughout the past ten years across undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, in a variety of diverse modules and across multiple genres in English Literature, I believe teaching Beckett differs from teaching other writers. The fact that it enables a research-teaching nexus (Brew, 2010) undoubtedly heightens my experience as a lecturer, but this is superseded by witnessing time and again the influence the work has on the students. What is it about Beckett’s oeuvre that appeals to student minds? Does the curriculum and the order in which texts are studied affect the learning experience? In essence, does Beckett’s work have to approached or taught in a particular way? Jacques Derrida highlights the difficulty of endeavouring to critically analyse fragments or sections of Beckett’s writing, an approach which certainly has application for other authors’ work; he states ‘When I found myself, with students, reading some Beckett texts, I would take three lines, I would spend three hours on them, then I would give up because it would not have been possible, or honest, or even interesting to extract a few “significant” lines from a Beckett text’ (Derrida, 1991, 60).2

At Ulster University, we have created a Beckett Studies pathway from first year to final year, with the work also forming part of the curriculum on the MA course. Students studying a degree in English encounter *Waiting for Godot* in the first semester of their first year; it forms part of a compulsory introductory module designed to assist the transition from secondary to tertiary education,3 which explores the practical elements of literary criticism and interpretation and presents the formal features of the major literary genres.4 In addition, first-year students may also study *Not I*, which forms part of an optional module that proffers the opportunity to explore a range of short literary texts to help students develop their own reading, writing and analytic skills. Building on their examination of *Godot*, *Not I* is used to further illustrate how Beckett revolutionised dramatic form in the twentieth century; students are encouraged to think about Beckett’s desired intention, as described by Billie Whitelaw, in that ‘what [he] wanted was not the acting out of an internal thought, but the internal thought itself’ (Whitelaw, 1995, 120), which challenges them to re-evaluate what constitutes a play.5

In their second year, students have the option to take a module solely dedicated to Beckett’s work. In Samuel Beckett Studies, works are explored in the chronology of their composition; students are introduced to the historical, cultural and philosophical influences and by the end of the module should be able to trace the development and impact of Beckett’s writing throughout the twentieth century. Beginning with *Murphy*, the module covers *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* before turning to the drama and the major plays following *Godot*, including *Endgame, Happy Days* and *Krapp’s Last Tape* followed by later work, which includes *Footfalls, Rockaby* and *Company.* Hence, the module covers a fifty-year range, charting Beckett’s gravitation towards minimalism. Through an examination of the prose, drama, shorter fiction and non-fiction, including work for television and radio and incorporating audio-visual material, the module is designed to develop students’ capacity to analyse and critically examine diverse forms of writing.

In final year, students again have the option to study Beckett as part of a module called Twentieth Century Irish Writers, which includes Yeats and Joyce. This module identifies and examines the prominent characteristics of the key texts of each writer, locating them in relation to the wider Irish, English and European literary landscapes. By this point students are tackling texts such as *The Unnamable* and *Worstward Ho,* where Beckett’s ‘fail better’ challenges them by appearing countercultural. Students are compelled to acknowledge the limitations of language and interrogate ideas raised in the oft-quoted German Letter, regarding ‘a literature of the unword’ and the artistic process of de-creation.6 In addition, they explore late plays such as *A Piece of Monologue* and *Ohio Impromptu*, where they examine, for example, ‘the idea of the editor, still working on the text, and the idea of a voice whose relation to the image is unfixed’ (Pattie, 2000, 393–403). John Pilling’s comment that ‘It is, strictly speaking, impossible to fully understand a given work of Beckett’s without knowing everything antecedent and subsequent to it’ (Pilling, 1976, 63), does carry weight. Beckett’s texts require multiple readings, but knowledge of his oeuvre enables the light to percolate and facilitates greater comprehension of individual works, which raises the question of whether it is futile to incorporate only one Beckett text or play within a curriculum. Is *Watt*, for instance, comprehensible if read or taught as a stand-alone text? Or does it take a working knowledge of the Beckett canon to appreciate its tropes and nuances?

The Beckett voice, which students quickly become accustomed to, does tell of a past, alluding often to characters, incidents and scenes found within earlier writing. The work abounds with allusions, not only to other writers but also to Beckett’s own earlier texts, consisting of repetition and echo. The Beckett canon may therefore be conceived of as a series of building blocks, with each text or play influencing subsequent ones, and therefore to understand an individual work we perhaps need to comprehend its positioning. This augments H. Porter Abbott’s thesis in his book *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph*, where he states, ‘The object of this book is to show how Beckett’s art can be read as a continuous autographical project’ (Abbott, 1996, 22)*.* Hence, the pedagogical rationale for teaching Beckett chronologically pertains to this reasoning; the order in which the works are taught carries as much credence as the texts/plays that are placed on the curriculum, as this ‘authorial intertextuality’ posits the theory that in essence Beckett teaches Beckett, in the same context that ‘iron sharpens iron’ (Proverbs 27: 17).

Beckett’s significant statement that ‘The key word in my plays is “perhaps”’ (Driver, 1961, 23) embodies my educational philosophy. I always preface lectures by telling students that my *raison d'être* is not to tell them what to think, but rather to give them ways of thinking.7 Beckett’s work undoubtedly enables multiple ways of thinking, ensuring that students are equipped with knowledge and skills pertaining to the aims of relevant higher education subject benchmarks.8 That the oeuvreencompasses various genres and artistic media makes it ideal for ‘Special Author’ modules but also pertinent for a range of survey modules, in addition to modules with specific thematic areas, across a range of disciplines. Further, resources such as the relatively recent publication of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett* alongwith the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project(BDMP)has widened access to material that can be utilised within the classroom, to enhance a greater comprehension of the work and the development of Beckett’s thinking and creative process. In addition, the work provides a pathway not just to other writers such as Dante, Shakespeare, Proust and Joyce – to name the most obvious – but more significantly to other subjects, including philosophy, psychoanalysis, art, music and theology. In essence, Beckett’s work itself becomes a pedagogical tool, giving students insight and access to a range of interdisciplinary topics and areas of study. They may sign up for what they believe to be a literary studies module and leave with a knowledge not only of Beckett’s oeuvre, but also an awareness of, for example, Yeats, Rembrandt, Schubert, Beethoven, Descartes, Schopenhauer, Geulincx, Democritus, Jung, and Mauthner; the list might be inexhaustible.

The issue of Beckett and pedagogy, specifically anecdotal observations regarding teaching Beckett, has arisen in conversation with various colleagues, including Robert Scanlan, Gerald Dawe and Trish McTighe, over the past number of years. When asked to reflect on the significance of dealing with Beckett’s work within the classroom for the purposes of this article, the subsequent accounts from the aforementioned, in addition to Randall Stevenson’s, were garnered from responses to the following questions:

How does teaching Beckett differ from teaching other writers?

What impact does Beckett have?

How do we measure/quantify minds that are changed by Beckett?

At what level is Beckett being taught?

What type of modules is Beckett taught on?

Which texts are taught and why?

Selected due to their substantial experience of working in higher education, proficiency in the field of twentieth-century literature and procedural knowledge of teaching Beckett, these scholars provide insight into pedagogical practice in relation to Beckett from a literary and practice-based perspective, and each demonstrates how Beckett’s work is effective in creating significant learning experiences which have application for the wider field of literary pedagogy at higher education level.

Stevenson identifies the role Beckett plays in providing students with a greater propensity to comprehend the changes wrought by the twentieth century. He suggests that:

No other writer was better equipped – by literary antecedents and awareness, and by historical situation, in Paris collapsing under the Nazis – to reproduce in the form, language and intensity of their imagination, the hard, almost unendurable experience of the mid-[twentieth century]. Beckett differs from other writers because he is more challenging, or more profound, though this can also make him more difficult and demanding to read, or teach – the prose, anyway. But we measure or ‘quantify’ minds changed [by Samuel Beckett] by recognising their new, or renewed, capacity to engage unswervingly with the world history had made after 1945, and with the tortured yet overwhelming new forms of representation this demanded.9

In addition to enabling the student mind to ‘think differently’ and engage with new forms, Beckett’s work often initiates a turning inwards, facilitating a confrontation with self and the processes of one’s own mind, processes which Scanlan cultivated in his seminar series on Beckett. Scanlan, who never taught Beckett alongside other authors – believing that with insufficient time Beckett confuses rather than illuminates – prompted students to locate the voice within their own minds and discern who was talking and to whom. They were then encouraged to write down their thoughts. This exercise, which took place before they encountered Beckett’s work, required them to think about who was generating the voice, who was listening to it and who was transcribing it, thereby enabling them to think about self and consciousness as fundamental ideas raised throughout Beckett’s oeuvre.10 Scanlan also taught the plays in chronological order, paired with concurrent prose work. Describing Beckett as the most significant part of a teaching career lasting over forty years, Scanlan comments, ‘I can say unequivocally that my Beckett seminars have been – over a span of decades from the late seventies to the present – the single most impactful subject I have taught at MIT and at Harvard, [and] the most “life-changing” for my students’. This impact was evidenced not only through discussions in class, but also via assignments and other forms, described by Scanlan as the most concentrated, personal and deep responses; these included ‘art works’ such as paintings, musical compositions, performance, sculptures, photographs and films, all inspired by the reading and discussion of Beckett’s work.

Dawe recalls that when he began teaching Beckett (his poetry and early fiction, in addition to *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame, Krapp’s Last Tape* and *All That Fall*) in the late 1970s in University College Galway (now National University of Ireland, Galway or NUIG), the work at that point was barely taught in Irish university English departments.11 Is this a reflection of Ireland’s relationship with Beckett at this stage, or purely a sign that ‘Beckett Studies’ had yet to make its impact on higher education? By the time Dawe moved to Trinity College Dublin in 1988, Beckett had become an important part of his teaching and supervising at both undergraduate and graduate levels; this is not surprising, of course, given that at this time the School of English had Beckett experts Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene and, in addition, the library housed manuscripts that had been donated by Beckett himself. Dawe challenges us to think not only about the suitability of the work for the classroom, but also about the role of pedagogy itself with regards to Beckett, and the significance of experiential learning. He says:

The forbidding quality of the work is much less daunting for the classroom, even though I still recall the shock when I’d start off a class with, say, *Footfalls* or *Rockaby* or *Play*. Suddenly the collective concentration would go up several notches and the class, you felt, had experienced something very different, very physical. Teaching Beckett isn’t really what I was doing; it was more like opening the door into the dark and light of his world.

This ‘experience’ of Beckett, which is often an emotive one, takes the students beyond an intellectual response and is perhaps one of the defining features of the pedagogical implications of facilitating access to his work within the classroom; perhaps we are not required to ‘teach’ Beckett, a challenging concept for the ‘educator’, but rather enable an encounter with the material, as the writing adheres to what Theodor Adorno describes as art’s task: ‘To make things of which we do not know what they are’ (Adorno, 1997, 114). As Dawe clearly articulates, ‘Beckett defines literature in a way that Picasso defines modern art; nothing is ever the same after reading him or watching his plays being performed or listening to his radio plays. It’s just that ‘simple”’. He suggests that ‘Beckett recasts everything about literary form and leaves us in the open spaces on our own’. Dawe believes that it is impossible to measure or quantify how we are changed by Beckett’s work, but he does note that the change is fundamental, claiming that ‘You can’t read literature the same way after you read Beckett’. McTighe who tends to work chiefly with final-year students on Beckett also acknowledges how the work can be utilized at first-year level on introductory modules as ‘a way of thinking through the nature of dramatic form itself’, in addition to issues regarding modernity, postmodernity and ecology. Working within drama departments it is not surprising that McTighe’s approach is performance based and heavily focused on the dramatic texts, although prose performances do also feature. Teaching Beckett through performance facilitates an alternative learning experience, as McTighe articulates:

I work from the concrete specifics of staging, have them move or speak through the text, and discoveries follow. I’ve done taster workshops, on *Not I* for instance, with pre-university students and, even in a short space of time, found that having them explore the word ‘out’, having them read the text slowly then quickly, sees them grasp something essential about the play – faster than by reading I think, as reading such a fragmented text can be quite daunting.

McTighe has taught Beckett through the more traditional methods of reading and discussion and has found this approach effective, especially when dealing with students who find the work an intellectual challenge; however, she believes that a ‘deep, embodied understanding’ is best achieved via practical working methods.12

An encounter with Beckett has the capacity to alter how we intrinsically engage with literature but it also goes beyond this. In a post-show talk of the Royal Court tour of *Not I/Footfalls/Rockaby,* Lisa Dwan made a comment that resonated; she said ‘people are ready for Beckett now’.13 In the current social climate it appears that students are certainly ready for Beckett. It is perhaps noteworthy that in 2016 the BBC broadcast a documentary entitled *The Age of Loneliness,* examining the social isolation in modern society affecting people from all ages and backgrounds. In April 2018 new research revealed that ‘Loneliness [is] more likely to affect young people’ (Coughlan, 2018), and in October 2018, the Mental Health Foundation (UK) posted a blog on the declining state of student mental health in universities.14 We are reminded of Beckett’s words in his study on Proust: ‘We are alone. We cannot know and we cannot be known’ (Beckett, 1999, 66). His focus on the marginalised, the aged, the sick, the bereaved, the victimised, the isolated and the lonely offers something that seriously resonates; he provides insight into ‘profounds of mind. Of mindlessness’ (Beckett, 1990, 488). As McMullan and Wilmer contend:

The borders between self and other, liveness and spectrality, sound and silence are breached. Beckett resolutely resisted realism: his worlds and subjects are self-consciously created, imagined, however ill, and yet they reflect back on our own ways of constructing world, self, and other, offering us new ways of seeing, or of perceiving what lies beyond the limits of habitual perception. (McMullan and Wilmer, 2009, 2)

Beckett’s ability to articulate the human condition, the suffering and despair, coupled with his depiction of stoicism and compassion penetrates minds and impacts students deeply. Many attest to the reality that studying Beckett makes them think differently not only about literature, but also about life *per se*, often describing the work as ‘timeless’, ‘profoundly moving’, ‘terrifying’ and ‘comforting’. Students often respond in a similar manner to Billie Whitelaw, who claimed, ‘I always understood the *feelings* he wanted to convey, even when I didn’t understand the words’ (Whitelaw, 1995, 47), reaffirming the point that often the impact fundamentally supersedes an intellectual one. It is therefore not surprising that only last year a nineteen-year-old student in my second-year module claimed that studying Beckett’s work was ‘like having to relearn how to study’, affirming Dawe’s comment that after reading Beckett one must read literature differently: an important insight for pedagogical practice.

In 2018 The World Economic Forum provided their projections for the jobs landscape in 2022, noting that ‘“Human” skills such as creativity, originality and initiative, critical thinking, persuasion and negotiation will likewise retain or increase their value’,15 promoting the necessity of the arts and humanities. Teaching Beckett helps cultivate and hone these skills in addition to others previously highlighted, enabling the creation of significant learning experiences, some of which are undoubtedly ineffable. Despite the perceived challenges, Beckett’s work is ideal for teaching, especially across a degree programme where a range of level-specific material and pedagogies can be utilised to enable progression and coherence and promote subject specialisation. In the documentary *Check the Gate – Putting Beckett on Film* (Blue Angel Films, 2001), the work is summarized in three words which ultimately articulate why we teach Beckett and why students respond: ‘purity, economy and truth’.

NOTES

1. See the Research Excellence Framework at https://www.ref.ac.uk/ (accessed 11 September 2019).

2. The locating of Derrida source is indebted to Gontarski (2017, 1).

3. The UK Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) included *Waiting for Godot* in their 2016 revised GCE English Literature Specification, as part of ‘Unit AS 1, Section B: The Study of Drama 1900–Present’. See www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/microsites/english\_literature/revised\_gce/ (accessed 11 September 2019).

4. Whether the play appeals or not, the intention is that it will have the same effect that it had on Harold Hobson when he reviewed the English-language premiere of the play in London at the Arts Theatre Club, describing it for the *Sunday Times* on 7 August 1955 as ‘something that will securely lodge in a corner of your mind for a long as you live’ (Knowlson, 1997, 415).

5. Alan Schneider famously declared *Waiting for Godot* ‘no longer merely a play. It has become a condition of life’ (Cohn, 1986, 169).

6. For the text of the 1937 German Letter in its original translation within *Disjecta*, from which this phrase derives, see Beckett (1983, 170–173).

7. Brater suggests that ‘What Beckett’s legacy may be finally about is what I like to call “a way of thinking”’ (2011, 2).

8. The *QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for English*, produced February 2015, states that the ‘broad aims of an English degree are to’:

inspire enthusiasm for the subject and an appreciation of its past and continuing social, cultural, political and economic importance; provide an intellectually stimulating experience of learning and studying; promote the understanding of verbal creativity and aesthetic features of literary and non-literary texts; help students to recognise and utilise the expressive resources of language; encourage students to reflect critically upon the acts of reading and writing and on the history of textual production and reception; foster wide and varied reading through a broad and diverse curriculum.

See QAA Subject Benchmark Statements at https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements# (accessed 12 March 2019).

9. Randall Stevenson (Professor of Twentieth-Century Literature, The University of Edinburgh) confirmed that at the University of Edinburgh, Beckett featured in first year (*Waiting for Godot*, which also occasionally featured on MSc courses) and second year (*Endgame*) as part of a general course; the ‘Trilogy’ formed part of an Honours (fourth-year) module on Postmodernism. *Godot* was used in first year to exemplify ‘Theatricality’, or metatheatre. *Endgame* featured in second year towards the end of a historical perspective running across first and second year and ending up with modernism and postmodernism. The Trilogy was utilised to illustrate where writing might go after Joyce and after the Second World War.

10. Robert (Bob) Scanlan is Artistic Director of the Poets’ Theatre. From 1977 to 1989 he was Director of the Drama Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has taught at Harvard since 1989 and was appointed Professor of the Practice of Theatre in the English Department at Harvard, and chaired Harvard’s Committee on Dramatics. Scanlan discussed his ideas about Beckett and ‘the voice’ with Kathryn White in a post-show discussion of *Beckett Women: Ceremonies of Departure* at The MAC, Belfast, 9 November 2017.

11. Gerald Dawe (Professor Emeritus) was Professor of English and Fellow of Trinity College Dublin until his retirement in 2017.

12. Trish McTighe is Lecturer in Drama at Queen’s University Belfast. Previously, she lectured at the University of Birmingham and was an AHRC post-doctoral researcher on the *Staging Beckett Project* at the University of Reading (2012-2015).

13. Lisa Dwan took part in a post-show discussion with Marie-Louise Muir following the performance at The MAC, Belfast 4 September, 2014.

14. Mental Health Foundation, ‘The declining state of student mental health in universities and what can be done’, 2 October 2018, www.mentalhealth.org.uk/blog/declining-state-student-mental-health-universities-and-what-can-be-done (Accessed 11 September 2019).

15. World Economic Forum, ‘5 things to know about the future of jobs’, 17 September 2018, www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/09/future-of-jobs-2018-things-to-know (Accessed 15 March 2019).

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