Philosophy, Literature and Education
Liam Gearon and Emma Williams

The idea for a seminar series on Philosophy, Literature and Education originated from a Symposium on Philosophy, Literature and Education at the Annual Conference of PESGB at New College, Oxford, in March 2013, chaired and initiated by Liam Gearon with James Conroy, Bob Davis, Richard Smith, and Sharon Todd.

Liam Gearon (University of Oxford) and Emma Williams (University of Warwick) now wish to note their thanks and appreciation for generous funding from the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain for one of the Society’s large grants to host a seminar series.

Liam and Emma successfully held three seminars over 2015-16. The seminars drew on a select group of academics with wide multi-disciplinary expertise at the interface of philosophy, literature and education. Three by all accounts successful events were hosted at the University of Oxford (December 2015), the University of Warwick (February 2016) and the British Academy, London (May 2016). The latter closing seminar saw Dr Alastair Niven, LVO, OBE, former Booker and Man Booker Prize Judge, host a question and answer session.

The seminar series was framed by a lead research question: ‘Why should the practice of literature be of significance for philosophy of education?’ The question was reflective of the overarching goal of the seminar series, demonstrating the manifold ways in which engagement with literature is productive for the philosophy of education.

On one level, the lead question invited critical reflection on the engagements between literature and philosophy, which have a veritable and established pedigree. The most celebrated of these have, of course, been contestatory in nature: we think of Plato’s (mis-construed?) move to ‘expel the artists’ from his ideal vision of the City in the Republic; or Keats’ lament of the ‘charms that fly at the touch of cold philosophy’ in his ‘Lamia’. The aim of the seminar series, however, was to be cognisant of the subtleties of the different forms of interface between the disciplines. These may be characterised as philosophy of literature; philosophy in literature (and literature in philosophy); philosophy and literature.

Our lead question was thus intended to provoke contributions that critically engaged with the strengths and limitations of these respective kinds of engagement in themselves – perhaps calling into question the very idea that there is a separation between philosophy and literature.

On a second level our research question generated explorations and appraisals of established questions at the interface of philosophy and literature, arising from new and more self-consciously educational perspectives. These included but were not limited to: questions of knowledge, truth and meaning (what do we learn from literature?); explorations of the educative value of specific genres of literature (e.g. dystopian literature for citizenship education); appraisals of literature as a form of moral education; and investigations of the broader ethical-educative value of literature.

In so doing, the seminar series aimed to revitalise a philosophy of education dimension to an historically critical and presently burgeoning field of enquiry, and to enliven a field of educational research with some important theoretical and methodological advances. This was intended to challenge yet also complement the predominance of social science research methodologies in educational research.
There is a third way in which the lead question of the seminar series was designed to provoke thought – itself reflective of the rich nature of what it means to ‘philosophise’ about education. Contributors examine pragmatic and applicable models for curriculum development in philosophy and literature, in schools and in universities. This included encouraging subject-specific reflections on the interface within English literature, history, geography, modern languages, mathematics and the sciences. Such contributions critically engaged with the uses (and abuses) of literature (and philosophy) within in emergent fields of educational practice (and research) such as citizenship, character and moral education.

Each seminar examined different elements of this research question and participants – of which there were around 50 specialist invitees – drew on their own distinctive philosophy of education orientation under the broad remit of the series. Select papers and thought-pieces to prompt discussion included:

**University of Oxford**

*The Intellectual Frame of Philosophy, Literature and Education*

An Ancient Quarrel?/A Clear Style?

*Angie Hobbs and Michael Luntley*

**University of Warwick**

*Learning with Philosophy and Literature*

Learning with Philosophy and Literature

*David Bakhurst*

Dystopian Literature

*Christine Sypnowich*

**The British Academy, London:**

*Lessons from Dystopia: Literature, Political Philosophy and Citizenship Education*

Imagining the Alien: the possibilities for a hopeful understandings of the other through science fiction in a prison education project

*Elizabeth Hoult*

War and Representation Network (WAR-Net)

*Kate McLoughlin*

Literature, Religion and Freedom of Expression: Researching the worldwide association of authors, English and International PEN

*Liam Gearon*

Question and Answer session with special guest invitee

*Dr Alastair Niven, LVO, OBE*

Former Booker and Man Booker Prize for Fiction Judge

Liam and Emma also successfully bid for Guest Editorship of a Special Issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* which will see publication in 2018.

All of this is part of a programme of work at the interface of Philosophy, Literature and Education, which includes:
(1) New examinations of the relations and contestations between the practice of literature and philosophy in the context of educational research.
(2) Unique perspectives on existing debates in philosophy and literature by exploring their educational implications.
(3) Novel appraisals of the educational practice of literature (and philosophy), through an assessing emerging trends and/or defining future possibilities.
(4) Providing a justification for the cultural/ research value of philosophy of education;
(5) Extending PESGB networks to other organisations, for example, and notably, those working in Aesthetics, as well as Philosophy and Literature.

In regard to the development and extension of the networks and avenues of inquiry, Liam Gearon and Emma Williams have also successfully bid for the Society for Educational Studies Annual Colloquium, this year on Writers and their Education, to be held at Oriel College, University of Oxford, 20-21 September 2018. The Colloquium brings together scholarly examination of conceptions, perceptions and representations of education in the life and works of writers across all genres – literary and popular, cross-age fiction, including children’s literature – with a critical appraisal of their significance and value for the academic field of Education Studies. For further details please email Liam (liam.gearon@education.oxford.ac.uk) or Emma (e.williams.1@warwick.ac.uk). Details of the Call for Papers are available on the Society for Education Studies website: (http://soc-for-ed-studies.org.uk)