First-Year English at UTAS: Interview with the 2013 Winner of the TATE Prize in Excellence in English Learning

In 2012 TATE and UTAS English initiated a prize for the student who, having successfully completed at least one pre-tertiary (TCE) English course in Tasmania, achieves the best result in first-year English at UTAS. The first-year English program at UTAS comprises two core units, HEN101 English 1A and HEN102 English 1B, and an elective unit, HEN107 Writing Short Fiction. The core units are both taught face-to-face on the Sandy Bay and Newnham campuses, and by distance. Writing Short Fiction is taught face-to-face at the Sandy Bay campus.

English 1A asks the question “How do short stories, poems, plays, novels and films generate meaning?” and focuses on building skills in close reading, critical thinking, and academic writing. The unit is structured around 5 modules focusing on, in order, poetry, short fiction, drama, screen texts, and novels, and includes both canonical and ‘popular’ works in English. English 1B considers the importance of tradition and canonicity to the ways we value, understand and circulate popular and literary texts. In this unit, students develop their knowledge of key topics in English studies and hone essential skills for writing academic research essays, examining the concept of a literary canon and introducing students to the work of political criticism. Writing Short Fiction introduces students to the steps involved in producing polished works of short fiction, and focuses on developing skills in writing craft (generating ideas, redrafting, copy-editing), close reading of short-fiction, and peer-to-peer feedback.

In 2012, the first year the TATE Prize was offered, it was won by Rebecca Smith, who is enrolled in the English major and has taught into the PASS (Peer Assisted Learning Scheme) program for English since the beginning of 2013. The 2013 TATE Prize winner was Ellyn Carter who, by a happy coincidence, conducted the interview with Rebecca published in EduTATE last year. Ellyn was home-schooled for much of her primary and secondary education and completed years 11 and 12 through Flexible Learning, and is enrolled in a Bachelor of Psychology at UTAS. Anna Young conducted this interview. Anna completed English Studies at Guildford Young College (Glenorchy campus) in Year 11 and English Writing at Rosny College in Year 12, and is currently enrolled in first-year English.

I am delighted to introduce two outstanding UTAS English students to the readers of EduTATE. Please feel free to contact me with any questions about the first-year English program at UTAS.

Anna: What background did you have in studying English prior to coming to UTAS?
Ellyn: I had been home-schooled up until I came to university… I did distance ED for Year 11 and 12 where I did English. But before I did that I was a member of an adult’s writers
I was the only person there under 50 (I was 13) and was there for 5 years. So that was my biggest background in English. And I always liked reading and writing.

**What type of writing did the group do?**
It was about short fiction. It was a really casual type of group of 15 people who would get together every week. We’d have a topic and write a short story about it. It was great.

**So what pulled you towards tertiary level English?**
It’s always been the subject I’ve enjoyed. I’ve always really loved English and language.

**Did university English meet your expectations?**
I really didn’t know what to expect when I first came to university so I don’t think I really had any expectations exactly but I did really enjoy it. I really enjoyed the discussions that went on in tutorials. It was definitely much better coming and doing English at UTAS then it was doing it in isolation with no feedback other than my teachers. It was a really different experience, a different dynamic.

**What, to you, is the biggest difference between English at university and your previous English studies?**
Well it’s a lot more in depth. The English classes I did for college were good but they were much, much more surface level. I didn’t have as much opportunity to explore the texts and inject my own feelings and thoughts about them into it. It was more of an opportunity to express yourself.

**When coming to university did you feel prepared by your previous college experience?**
No. Well actually, the really good thing that came from my home schooling and distance education background was that I really had to be self-motivated. I didn’t have anyone kicking me to do things. I was doing everything myself. So that self-motivation helped a lot when coming to university where there is very little actual guidance pushing me to do things.

**What are you studying at UTAS?**
I am doing a Bachelor of Psychology which means I have (essentially) two Psychology majors. I’m doing a minor in Philosophy and then English units are my consistent elective throughout. Unfortunately after this year it will all be Psychology units and I am really going to miss doing English and Philosophy.

**Now that you have successfully completed first year and are well into your degree, where do you see your study – particularly your elective study in the field of English – taking you in life?**
Well the aim is to become a clinical psychologist. So, while that isn’t all that related to English I still feel that skills that I gained through my English studies will be relevant throughout my life as well as in general in terms of what I want to do in my spare time. It helps you read better and I actually have aspirations to do creative writing in a more professional sense. […] I think it’s important to use university not only to develop the way you want to go career wise but also in terms of your own interest in things that you actually want to do in your life, outside of an actual ‘career’.
If you were to publish some work, what type of writing would that be? I am actually doing the Writing Short Fiction course at the moment. Short fiction tends to be the thing I go towards probably because I don’t have the attention span to write a full on novel. But if I could just continue writing and eventually get something published then I’d be very happy.

Did you find the difference in teaching – particularly going from a distance study to university – significant? Probably the most significant difference is the fact that you’re in very constant personable conversation with your teachers while you’re in year 11 and 12 but once you get to university it’s much more distant. You don’t necessarily know you’re lecturer all that well, you might be a little bit closer with your tutor but it’s still not quite the same contact that there was – at least that’s what I found in distance education.

Last year, you interviewed Rebecca Smith, the 2012 winner of the TATE Prize. Did your time with her inspire you to work harder in English to try and win the award as well? The award hadn’t even crossed my mind as a thing that continued into this year but hearing her talk about her own experiences was very interesting and I certainly think it’s useful to hear about the experiences of others within the same units. It gives you some perspective.

Did you ever imagine at the time, that one year later you’d be in her position? No, not at all: it was a huge surprise when I found out I had won the award.

What do you feel has been the most rewarding thing about English at UTAS? The opportunity to express yourself, the connections you make with other people who enjoy the same kind of literature as you and the discussions that can come from that. You have to look at texts in a slightly different way – you’re forced into taking on new perspectives about texts, the questions direct you to look at things you wouldn’t normally have thought about on your own. And I found the tutorials really helpful.

Would you recommend English to other people entering university? Definitely. Even if you’re not actually majoring in English, it will give you an idea of what university is like and also to encourage you to think deeper about texts. It will engage your critical thinking skills as well, which is incredibly valuable. I probably learned more about critical thinking through doing English than any other subject.

Image Below L-R: Anna Young and Ellyn Carter