

Fictionality in Context Network: Proposal

Summary of proposed research collaboration

The proposal is to establish a research network comprising scholars from York's Department of English and Related Literature and the Scandinavian Institute at the University of Aarhus, to develop a project on the theme of fictionality considered as a rhetorical resource rather than an ontological quality or stable generic marker. Such a view implies that fictionality is contextually variable, and the focus of the project will be to explore the nature and implications of such variations from diachronic, cross-cultural, and cross-disciplinary perspectives – for example in relation to generically problematic medieval texts; in the context of clashing political and cultural world views in the contemporary Middle East; in meeting the interpretative challenge of hybrid or non-fictional texts that exploit fictive strategies; and in articulating the relations between literary, legal and philosophical fictions. The theoretical groundwork for such an approach is already laid, and the research formations identifying this common research interest already exist in each institution (York's Fictionality Group and the Fictionality Research Group in Aarhus); the occasion and need for this collaborative exchange is the development of the model's potential as a conceptual framework for interpretation of specific texts in diverse historical, cultural and institutional contexts.

Proposed interactions with partner institution

In order to initiate the multi-scholar dialogue required to establish a viable continuing network and to refine its collaborative goals, we propose to hold two workshops, each running over two days, one in York and one in Aarhus. Each occasion will involve five key scholars from one institution travelling to the other to present their own research within the context of the issue of fictionality, enabling us to develop a dialogue between theoretical and contextual research perspectives, and to discern analogies and theoretical generalizations in the juxtaposition of different texts and contexts in which the communicative function of fictionality is at stake.

Expected timings

The proposal is for the first of these workshops to take place in summer term 2012, and the second to take place in autumn 2012.

Anticipated outputs

The occasion of the workshop presentations themselves will result in conference papers and/or articles disseminating this research and the conceptual frame it uses in the participants' own specialist research contexts. The immediate goal of the workshops however is to generate a consolidated research inquiry leading to an edited volume of case studies demonstrating the value of situating a rhetorical model of fictionality in specific contexts. The work towards this volume will be the basis for an external funding bid to the Leverhulme Foundation for a three-year International Network Grant. The longer-term prospects of the collaboration include a further volume more narrowly conceived as a literary-theoretical exposition and illustration of the interpretative value of a contextual, rhetorical approach to fictionality; a cross-disciplinary volume exploring the functions of fictive rhetoric beyond fiction and literature; and a volume addressing the political and theoretical implications of reconceiving the relation between narratives and fictional worlds in rhetorical terms.

Anticipated benefits of the award

The award will provide the means and occasion to fully work out and establish the goals and long-term viability of the fictionality groups already established within York (by Richard Walsh) and Aarhus (by Henrik Skov Nielsen); It will enable us to capitalize upon the complementary strengths of these two groups, bringing the historical and cross-cultural strengths of the York group into productive relation with the narratological, cross-media and cross-disciplinary strengths of the Aarhus group; it will provide for a framework facilitating the individual research of the members of those groups in the Department of English and Related Literature and in the Scandinavian Institute in Aarhus; it will provide an opportunity to draw out and develop some of the implications of the theoretical perspective already set out in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (Richard Walsh), through historically and politically contextualized case studies and textual examples; and it will provide a springboard to productive cross-disciplinary exchange.

How this will contribute to departmental international aims

The proposal serves the English Department's international aims by developing a strong research connection with a highly-reputed European university, and beyond that enhancing the Department's profile in fictionality and narrative research across Europe. It offers the prospect of attracting substantial external funding to build upon this network connection, both from national funding bodies such as the Leverhulme Foundation and subsequently, on a larger scale, within the EU funding framework. It provides a vehicle for significant international research outputs in both the short and longer term; and for postgraduate students it enhances the international research culture of the department, and provides future opportunities for greater international student mobility.

How the collaboration will be sustained in future

The immediate goal is to secure the future sustainability of the collaboration through external funding on a network model. The topic also offers the basis for several large scale follow-up projects that would have good prospects of attracting funding, with participants in this collaboration as principal or co-investigators. The collaboration will also help to embed York, the English Department and the Fictionality Group members in a larger context of European research in fictionality and narrative, with connections especially in Germany (Hamburg, Freiburg) and across Scandinavia, through the European Narratology Network.