

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Birmingham		
Unit of Assessment: UoA27: English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Birmingham Stories: New ways of reading well in Birmingham and beyond		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013–2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Kate Rumbold	Senior Lecturer in English Literature	2007–present
Dr Ruth Gilligan	Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing	2014–present
Professor Michaela Mahlberg	Chair in Corpus Linguistics	2015–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015–December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>In 2019, the National Literacy Trust (NLT) partnered with the University of Birmingham's (UoB) interdisciplinary 'Birmingham Stories' team to launch a new spin-out branch. That the NLT – which supports over 250,000 children annually – partnered with Birmingham Stories is testament to the impact of the team who had long been working with a range of literary organisations to (a) enhance confidence and develop empathy in diverse learners; (b) influence the work of local, national and international charities; and (c) change teachers' professional practice by influencing the delivery of English curricula and the design of CPD. The partnership further influenced the work of the NLT by changing its practice and target demographic, thus contributing to the fulfilment of the organisation's 2016 ambition to implement a 'wider definition of reading well'.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Combining their expertise in English Language (Mahlberg), Literature (Rumbold) and Creative Writing (Gilligan), the interdisciplinary Birmingham Stories team came together to reveal how new ways of reading and analysing fiction could generate a more holistic understanding of narrative. The team showed how critically neglected framing devices often shape the relationship between narrator, character and reader, thus affecting our responses to fictional characters; they then applied this research via classroom experiments and creative outputs of their own to analyse these responses in practice.</p> <p>Mahlberg's AHRC- and ERC-funded projects developed and applied the CLiC web app, which facilitates computer-assisted textual analysis with a specific focus on the distinction between narrative and fictional speech. This analysis brought to light recurring features across Dickens's novels and other 19th-century texts. For example, it revealed how, contrary to critical opinion, these features — which can be as seemingly inconsequential as the reporting clauses that frame speech (e.g., 'she said/cried/shouted') — have the capacity to subtly steer readers' responses. This analysis also revealed the nuanced and authentic patterns found in fictional speech, highlighting its similarity to contemporary everyday speech that previous research had not addressed in this way (RO1, RO2).</p> <p>RF1: Alternative approaches to texts, such as computer-assisted analysis, can reveal the significance of narrative techniques that are largely ignored or neglected by traditional literary criticism.</p> <p>Rumbold's research also focused on the framing of direct speech in fiction: in this case, the numerous overt quotations from literature that feature in 18th-century novels. Contrary to the critical assumption that they were merely decorative additions to a new genre, these quotations played a central role, since characters would frequently directly quote Shakespeare and other authors to illuminate their emotional state. The repeated framing phrases that introduced these quotations (e.g., 'as that grand master of human nature, Shakespeare, says ...') ultimately conferred new emotional authority on Shakespeare himself in the eyes of the novel-reading public (RO3).</p>		

RF2: Shakespearean quotations are directly responsible for Shakespeare’s reputation as an emotional authority, having been used by other authors for centuries as a means of illuminating their characters’ emotional state.

Gilligan likewise analysed the use of framing devices and quotation, this time in contemporary novels focused on characters from “other” communities. She formulated a “Narratology of Otherness”, which she applied to the work of bestselling author Colum McCann. In his novel about the Roma community, for example, embedded speech, multiple points of view and Roma storytelling tropes allow McCann to offer a more nuanced and empathetic depiction of characters whose cultural backgrounds differ from his own. Gilligan also researched McCann’s commitment to empathy more broadly, including via his storytelling charity Narrative 4 (RO4).

RF3: Framing devices and POV can be used to negotiate the ethical challenges of writing about different cultures; this requires an empathetic approach from the author and solicits an empathetic response from the reader, as seen in the work of Colum McCann.

Gilligan then drew on this “Narratology of Otherness” to write her own novel, *Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan*, which was inspired by the Irish-Jewish community. By incorporating multiple points of view, embedded text and Yiddish storytelling techniques, the novel offered a sensitive and empathetic portrait of ‘characters whose stories have been neglected by [...] Irish Literature’ (*Guardian*). Gilligan was invited to events across the world (e.g., Ireland, US, Israel) to discuss this community and its little-known history, and was commissioned to write articles on the topic for mainstream international publications (RO5).

RF4: Storytelling can raise public awareness around and lead to a more nuanced, empathetic understanding of minority communities.

Finally, the ability of emotionally resonant creative works to engage people on multiple levels was also the focus of Rumbold’s AHRC-funded ‘Uses of Poetry’ project. Rumbold tested and revealed how, in the present-day classroom, inviting students first to respond emotionally to literary texts actually deepened — rather than distracted from — their cognitive analysis.

Students sought not simply to identify the formal features of the text, but to trace their initial emotional responses to specific verbal choices, and thus to understand the poem more fully by seeing precisely how it had affected them (RO6).

RF5: Encouraging emotional responses to literature in the classroom deepens students’ understanding and enhances their analysis of the texts they study.

3. References to the research

RO1 Cermakova, A., & M. Mahlberg (2018) ‘Translating fictional characters — Alice and the Queen from the Wonderland in English and Czech’, in A. Cermakova & M. Mahlberg (eds), *The Corpus Linguistic Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 223- 253. DOI: 10.1075/scl.87.10cer

RO2 Mahlberg, M., Wiegand, V., Stockwell, P., & Hennessey, A. (2019) ‘Speech-bundles in the 19th-century English novel’. *Language and Literature*, 28.4: 326-353. DOI: 10.1177/0963947019886754

RO3 Rumbold, Kate (2016) *Shakespeare and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Cultures of Quotation from Samuel Richardson to Jane Austen* (Cambridge University Press). ISBN: 9781107132405

RO4 Gilligan, Ruth (2016) ‘Towards a Narratology of Otherness: Colum McCann, Ireland, and a New Approach to Transcultural Fiction’, *Studies in the Novel* (Spring). DOI: 10.1353/sdn.2016.0005

RO5 Gilligan, Ruth (2016/17) *Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan* (Atlantic Books, Tin House Books, Penn Israel). ISBN: 9781782398592

RO6 Rumbold, Kate, & Simecek, Karen (2016) ‘Affective and Cognitive Responses to Poetry in the University Classroom’, *Changing English*, 23.4: 335–350. DOI: 10.1080/1358684X.2016.1230468

4. Details of impact

1. The Birmingham Stories team was responsible for the **creation of a new spin-out branch of the National Literacy Trust (NLT)**. Launched in October 2019 and titled — fittingly — ‘Birmingham Stories’, this branch was the NLT’s **first HEI-research-led literacy hub** as well as the **first to prioritise teenagers and adults**. The NLT already had ten hubs across the UK, each designed to tackle the specific literacy needs of particular regions; it had also highlighted,

in 2016, the need for 'a wider definition of reading well' (S9). After observing **'the success of the literacy projects arising from Kate, Michaela and Ruth's research'**, the NLT saw an opportunity to address this need, to target a different demographic and thus to enact change in new ways in Birmingham and beyond (S1; RF1–RF5).

The Birmingham Stories team had already been delivering in this space through partnerships with literacy organisations, providing a base of work for the NLT to roll out and build upon; specifically, the team had **(a) enhanced confidence and developed empathy in diverse learners, (b) influenced the work of local, national and international charities, and (c) changed teachers' professional practice by influencing the delivery of English curricula and the design of CPD.**

a) Enhanced confidence and developed empathy in diverse learners

The **confidence and empathy of over 300 diverse teenagers was enhanced** by Gilligan running the UK's first "story exchange" workshops (RF3, RF4); **100% said the workshops helped them foster empathy, 97% appreciated diversity more as a result, 88% said they now felt inspired to work for change in their community** (S2). Participants said the story exchange — a methodology devised in the US, which culminates in retelling a stranger's life story *framed in the first person* as if it were your own — **'changed the way I think about people from different ethnic backgrounds'** and **'profoundly shaped my view on humanity'**; they also said **'I'm more confident in myself, I take more pride in what I do, I'm much more understanding and empathetic and more sociable'** (S2). Similarly, Rumbold devised adult literacy workshops which not only improved reading skills, but **enhanced emotional skills such as confidence and motivation** (RF2, RF5). Participants said: **'Because of your workshop I have become much more self-reflective'** and **'never did I feel valuable'**, but afterwards **'I left with a completely different outlook'** (S3). This impact was achieved by inviting learners to consider Shakespearean quotations through the lens of their own emotions, which in turn enhanced their ability to understand complex texts. Piloted at the Library of Birmingham in 2017, the workshops were rolled out by the Birmingham Adult Education Service and, despite major COVID disruption, have already reached over 100 participants. Tutors praised the workshops' innovation, noting how Shakespeare's 'words resonate with all cultures and backgrounds', citing **'greater confidence'** amongst their students who are now **'more motivated'** (S3).

b) Influenced the work of local, national and international charities

The **practice, strategy and reach** of Narrative 4 (N4) — a global empathy-building charity founded by author Colum McCann, which has run over 100,000 story exchanges to date — was **changed by Gilligan** (RF3, RF4). As N4's Director of Global Programs testified: **'Ruth Gilligan has been directly responsible for N4's expansion into the UK and Ireland'** (S6). N4 was already running story exchanges across the US and overseas (e.g., South Africa, Israel, Palestine), but had yet to enjoy any presence in the UK; by organising story exchanges in Birmingham and generating media interest (e.g., an *Irish Times* article in 2016, a 6-page *Guardian* spread 2018, a Hay Festival talk 2019, a feature-length documentary which premiered in 2019), Gilligan **increased N4's profile** on this side of the Atlantic. This increased profile led to **new funding** (e.g., from Microsoft Ireland) and **new partnerships** (e.g., Tony Blair Faith Foundation and NLT); meanwhile Gilligan was invited to present her work as an example of best practice to over 500 educators at N4's global summits (2018, 2019), and to feature in N4's 2020 fundraising event hosted by Sting (2,395 online views to date). Finally, in Autumn 2020, N4 formally set up Narrative 4 UK and appointed Gilligan Director thereof. She is now responsible for recruiting, training and mentoring facilitators, and meeting with the COO to discuss strategic plans, once again attesting to **her role in the organisation's overseas development.**

Meanwhile, **the practice of Birmingham organisations**, such as the Birmingham Adult Education Service (BAES) and Library of Birmingham (LoB) was changed by Rumbold (RF2, RF5). In the words of BAES's Head of Curriculum, Rumbold's Shakespeare-based workshops **'informed our thinking and practice about the role and value of learners' emotional engagement** within their formal learning' and helped these learners to **'find a greater sense of voice and belonging within the service and beyond'** (S7). This led BAES — which works with over 13,000 adults annually — to recruit Rumbold to co-design a new, emotions-based Community Learning course. Launching in Spring 2021, this 14-week service-wide course is

intended to inspire emergent readers — a group BAES had hitherto struggled to engage — to begin reading for enjoyment. By bringing BAES learners to LoB, Rumbold's Shakespeare workshops also forged a new working relationship between two city-council-run organisations that had previously operated almost entirely independently of one another; LoB's Cultural Partnerships Manager describes how 'it is thanks to this bold and persistent work that a number of sometimes discrete functions such as the City Archive, Adult Education, and Children's library services have **recognised new ways of connecting to deliver better services to Birmingham citizens**' (S8). He also observes how Rumbold's workshops provided an '**innovative and relevant way for the library to engage adult learners** in relation to the Shakespeare collection' while the workshop delivery methods were also new, serving as '**an innovative and effective way of incorporating volunteer-led initiatives into our approach to community engagement and education**, thereby helping us meet our strategic aims as a public institution' (S8).

c) **Changed teachers' professional practice by influencing the delivery of English curricula and the design of CPD**

The professional practice of teachers was changed via Mahlberg's freely available CLiC app which brought cutting-edge digital tools into the English classroom (RF1). To date, CLiC has had over 19,370 users worldwide, while the 'CLiC Activity Book: Supporting the teaching of literature at GCSE and AS/A-level' has had over 1,668 international downloads (S4). The CLiC blog — which gives users an opportunity to share their experience of using CLiC — has had over 18,837 unique page views (S4), and documents how CLiC is being embedded in teaching practice; for example, one English teacher notes in her blog post '**CLiC is now very much a part of my teacher's toolkit!**' (S5). Eschewing the traditional focus on small extracts and sometimes decontextualised quotations, CLiC made it possible to take a holistic approach to narrative. It was added to A-Level resources and teaching guides (e.g., *The Language of Literature: An Introduction to Stylistics* and Hay Levels — a YouTube channel with over 5,500 subscribers). Given the rapid shift in the National Curriculum, teachers praised how CLiC enabled a 'more substantive analysis of both character [and] theme but also an exploration of contextual significance — all of which are fundamental to understanding the text at GCSE level [...] this **exciting new approach** could not have fallen into teachers' hands at a better time!' (S5).

The design and delivery of teacher CPD was also changed due to CLiC. CPD workshops focusing on digital reading skills in the English classroom were designed by Mahlberg; the CLiC team then ran ten workshops for teachers — one specifically for trainee teachers — some of which were then disseminated as examples of best practice via high-profile teacher conferences (e.g., Integrating English 2017 and researchEd 2019, 2020). Meanwhile, the approach was discussed in professional development publications (e.g., the Chartered College of Teaching magazine *Impact*) and was integrated into the offering of LitDrive — a teacher-led initiative providing innovative online CPD resources; as the organisation's founder testified 'the [CLiC] software demystifies Literature to a greater degree than ever before' (S5).

Since 2019, collaborating with the National Literacy Trust (NLT) generated further impact for the Birmingham Stories team, who collectively:

2. Influenced the work of the NLT by changing its practice and target demographic

Through Birmingham Stories, **the NLT shifted its traditional hub focus from early years/primary school students to teenagers and adults**. Launching the first hub to prioritise the social and educational inclusion of these neglected demographics was significant since 16.4% of adults in England — or 7.1 million people — can be described as having 'very poor literacy skills' (S9). This change in target demographic came about because of the Birmingham Stories team's proven expertise in engaging these groups via story exchange, emotional engagement and digital reading methods, as outlined above (RF1–5). This expertise formed the basis of the new hub and ultimately caused the NLT to reconsider its approach to literacy more broadly; as the NLT's Director of Operations testifies, the Birmingham Stories team had '**a deep and lasting impact on how the National Literacy Trust works and thinks**' (S1).

The NLT shifted its focus by **incorporating new methodologies** such as the story exchange to engage Birmingham teenagers from diverse wards. This was '**a first for the NLT**, both in

working with teenagers as a new demographic, and also using stories to connect different communities in a city. [...] The Story Exchange has **put empathy at the forefront of our thinking locally and nationally**' (RF3, RF4). This came about as a result of Gilligan's success in the field and led to a programme of exchanges between teenagers from across Birmingham (2020) as well as teenagers from different regional hubs (delayed until 2021 because of COVID). Meanwhile, to engage adult learners – a group the NLT had rarely targeted in the past – the NLT committed to delivering Rumbold's Shakespeare workshops to all adults currently studying GCSE English at BAES (RF2, RF5). As the Director of Operations explains, Rumbold's 'research has not only brought a **new understanding on what we mean to read well**, it has **moved us into working with a new demographic**' (S1). As a result, since the co-creation of Birmingham Stories, the NLT launched a national Adult Literacy Strategy and 'Kate's expertise [...] has **directly informed this strategy as well as the NLT's Adult Literacy Working Group**' (S1). The Group is now working towards a major 'State of the Nation' study of adult literacy in England reporting in 2022, which will directly inform policy via the All-Party Parliamentary working group, of which the NLT holds the secretariat. Combining the story exchange methodology and the focus on adult literacy, in December 2020 Rumbold and Gilligan ran a story exchange-based consultation process for the NLT, which allowed adult learners and tutors to share their experiences of reading and learning, before working together to co-design a new 'Reading for Enjoyment' programme (launching Spring 2021). The NLT was so impressed by the effectiveness of the story exchange as a consultative 'tool to better understand communities and their needs', they announced that 'the model is **now informing our new national Diversity, Inclusion and Community Engagement strategy**' (S1).

The NLT also **updated its existing national programmes aimed at adults and teenagers**, such as its flagship literacy and employability scheme 'Words for Work' to reflect a more holistic understanding of readiness for work beyond solely practical skills: 'Kate's research into emotions [...] has been taken on by our Words for Work employability programme – which has had 6,550 participants to date and 2,900 scheduled for 2021 – who are now using evaluation tools from Kate's research to understand the emotional impact of the programme' (S1). Meanwhile, recognising the role technology plays in how today's teenagers approach reading, the NLT **drew on Mahlberg's digital expertise to update its offering**. In 2020, for example, the NLT piloted a 'new kind of competition' which included CLiC-based materials to support the students in writing stories around the theme of 'Heroes' (S1). With 530 participants in total, teachers praised how the competition gave students a 'chance to spread their wings', made 'creative writing feel more real' and 'definitely motivated the writers and boosted their confidence' (S5). The NLT also updated Literacy for Learning — its whole-school literacy improvement programme for secondary teachers and leaders, which has reached 301 participants since October 2019 — to include CPD designed by Mahlberg, focusing on digital tools in the English classroom (RF1).

Finally, in order to achieve all of the above, the NLT **changed its approach to how it establishes its literacy hubs**, which included devising a **new 'Theory of Change' and governance structure**. The latter means Birmingham Stories is the first literacy hub to include both a Senior Steering Group (with Rumbold as co-chair) and a Research Committee (with Gilligan as co-chair), reflecting the fact that it is the only hub to be directly guided by research generated outside of the NLT (S1).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1. Testimony from Head of Operations, National Literacy Trust (February 2021).
- S2. Story Exchange feedback (2016-2019).
- S3. Shakespeare adult literacy workshops feedback (2017-2020).
- S4. CLiC engagement statistics (2017-2020).
- S5. CLiC feedback and blogposts (2018-2020).
- S6. Testimony from Head of Global Programmes, Narrative 4 (December 2020).
- S7. Testimony from Head of Curriculum, Birmingham Adult Education Services (February 2021).
- S8. Testimony from Cultural Partnerships Manager, Library of Birmingham (September 2020).
- S9. National Literacy Trust webpages.