

## **Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology and Religious Studies: an Investigation and Analysis: 1. Introduction to the research project**

Rebecca O'Loughlin

### **1.1 Background**

In 2007/8, the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies (SC for PRS) collaborated on a research project with the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences (CILASS CETL)<sup>1</sup> which investigated and assessed the role, and the potential, of inquiry-based learning (IBL) in Theology, Religious Studies and Biblical Studies (TRS). This report presents the conclusions of this research. Preliminary findings were also presented at a workshop on IBL in TRS in May 2008, jointly organised by the two Centres.<sup>2</sup>

The SC for PRS' interest in IBL emerges in part from an earlier study which it commissioned on pedagogical research in the context of TRS.<sup>3</sup> It is the view of both CILASS and the SC for PRS that learning through inquiry—that is, through self-directed research, with the support of academic and other staff—is a powerful and exciting way for students to develop both subject knowledge and a range of essential skills. The SC for PRS believes that IBL is a highly appropriate pedagogy for TRS, where the potential for truly innovative work, by learners and teachers alike, is considerable.

This research has reflected on this potential by mapping IBL activities in case study TRS communities and consulting the existing body of literature on IBL, particularly as it relates to the arts and humanities. This report, and the workshop which also formed part of the research project, draw conclusions based on this research which will contribute to a shared understanding of the potential and challenges associated with the practice of IBL in TRS, thus developing capacity to establish innovative approaches to IBL in this discipline. The SC for PRS also believes that the existing approaches to IBL in TRS departments which are detailed in this report are sustainable and transferable to different disciplines, including philosophy. We also look towards a future role for this research in informing other work on disciplinary differences in IBL at CILASS and beyond.

### **1.2 Methodology**

Two qualitative research methodologies were employed throughout the project: documentary analyses and surveys of case study departments.

In terms of documentary analyses, I performed a literature review of IBL materials. It proved very difficult to locate materials on IBL specifically in relation to TRS; of course, this is a research finding in itself, and it is one which

substantiates the rationale for this project. All resources consulted can be found in the bibliography to this report.

It was not within the scope of this study to map the practice of IBL pedagogies in TRS departments across the UK. Two TRS departments in UK institutions were chosen to be the subject of case studies. The Universities of Sheffield and Manchester were selected for focus, partly because these institutions host IBL4 CETLs. CILASS, the Sheffield-based CETL with which the SC for PRS collaborated on this project, has worked with the Department of Biblical Studies at Sheffield to develop inquiry-based activities for use in Biblical Studies. The University of Manchester is home to the Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning (CEEBL) which has worked with staff from the Department of Religions and Theology at Manchester to design inquiry-based curricula. Staff within the Religions and Theology department are also among the founders of the Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology, an inquiry-based doctorate which has been developed in collaboration with CEEBL, and also with the SC for PRS.

I also wanted to find out what the other IBL CETLs, beyond CILASS and CEEBL, are doing with TRS. The answer is: very little.<sup>5</sup>

However, in the course of my research at Sheffield and Manchester, and my literature review, I was able to identify other TRS departments where IBL is being practised, even if it is not labelled as such.

In terms of surveys, myself and Julie Gallimore, the SC for PRS' employability consultant, conducted semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with staff and students from Biblical Studies at Sheffield in order to gather empirical data on their experiences and views of IBL. I interviewed staff on a one-to-one basis, and Julie interviewed the students in focus groups.

I also conducted semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with staff and students from Religions and Theology at Manchester, to the same end. I interviewed one staff member on a one-to-one basis, and I interviewed other staff members and one student together in one group, which also comprised CEEBL staff. For pragmatic reasons, this group interview was more informal than that which Julie had conducted at Sheffield and it was not recorded (although notes were taken).<sup>6</sup>

Secondary focus group interviews with students from Biblical Studies at Sheffield, and with students from Religions and Theology at Manchester, conducted by members of staff from CILASS and CEEBL respectively,<sup>7</sup> were also drawn upon in the consultation process.

Staff from CILASS CETL were also consulted in group situations and individually by email. Acknowledgement should also go to Lesley Walker, Arabic/French/German and Latin Co-ordinator at the Modern Languages Teaching Centre at the University of Sheffield, who met with me to discuss tandem learning as a form of IBL.<sup>8</sup>

[Next page](#)

---

## Footnotes

- CILASS is one of 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) first funded by HEFCE in 2005. Of these 74, a number of other CETLs besides CILASS have supporting and promoting active learning and student research as their core function. These are the Centre for Active Learning (CeAL) in Geography, Environment and Related Disciplines, University of Gloucestershire; the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Applied Undergraduate Research Skills (CETL-AURS), University of Reading; the Centre for Promoting Learner Autonomy (CPLA), Sheffield Hallam University; the Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education (SCEPTre), University of Surrey; InQbate, the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Creativity, University of Sussex; the Centre for Excellence in Enquiry Based Learning (CEEBL), University of Manchester; and the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research,

Warwick University.

- More details about this event, entitled 'Finding Your Own Way: The Role of Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology, Religious Studies and Biblical Studies', are available on the SC for PRS' website at <http://www.prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/350>
- See Rebecca O'Loughlin, 'The Relationship between Pedagogical and Discipline-Specific Research Methods: Critical Perspectives', Discourse 7.2 (Spring 2008), pp.67-120. Available online at <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/PrsDiscourseArticles/32>
- Although reference to 'enquiry-based learning' (EBL) is common in the literature, I use 'inquiry-based learning' (IBL) throughout this report, for the reason that this is the spelling used by CILASS (as distinct from CEEBL, which uses the alternate 'e' spelling), with whom the SC for PRS collaborated formally on this project.
- I contacted CETL AURS, who said they had no engagement with TRS. I also contacted SCEPTRe, the Centre for Promoting Learner Autonomy (CPLA), and The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research but did not receive responses, and there was nothing on these CETLs' websites to indicate engagement with TRS.
- All participants were required to sign a consent form before taking part in interviews.
- Thanks to Bob Petrulis of CILASS and Louise Golding of CEEBL for sharing the data.
- Although it has its origins in modern language teaching, the SC for PRS believes that tandem learning is also an appropriate pedagogy for the TRS group of disciplines. In 2007, the SC for PRS commissioned a mini-project on interfaith tandem learning which will be reporting in 2009.

---

## **1. Introduction to the research project**

## **2. Introduction to Inquiry Based Learning and its potential benefits**

## **3. Case Study institution A: University of Sheffield**

### **3.1 Generic student focus group**

### **3.2 Interview with CILASS student ambassador**

### **3.3 Staff interviews**

### **3.4 Formal IBL provision**

#### **3.4.a Fieldwork recording project**

##### **3.4.a.i Fieldwork Recording: the videos**

##### **3.4.a.ii Fieldwork recording: staff and student interviews**

##### **3.4.a.iii Fieldwork recording: student focus group 1**

##### **3.4.a.iv Fieldwork recording: student focus group 2**

#### **3.4.b Other IBL projects**

### **3.4.c Tandem learning at the University of Sheffield**

## **4. Case Study institution B: University of Manchester**

### **4.1 Students Facilitating and Validating Peer Learning**

### **4.2 Engaging with Early Christian Communities: An IBL Approach**

### **4.3 The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology**

## **5. Analysis**

### **5.1 TRS and the CILASS framework for IBL**

### **5.2 The disciplinary culture of TRS**

### **5.3 Pragmatic considerations: employability, IBL and TRS**

### **5.4 Conclusions and notes of caution**

## **Bibliography**

## **Appendices**

---

Created on: October 26th 2009

Updated on: November 25th 2009